

# Book review malcolm X

Sociology



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BUSTER**

When saying the name Malcolm X many things come to mind extremist, violence, racists, but usually not motivational speaker. Catalytic is defined as increasing a reaction rate, Terrill uses this term to describe Malcolm X 's rhetoric style that left him a highly noted public figure. So why was he important? Why is Malcolm X a must read for high school and college students? In his book *Malcolm X: Inventing Radical Judgment* Robert E. Terrill makes the argument through out his book that though Malcolm X did not leave anything, or change laws, and his speeches were never documented correctly, but that it was his way of using rhetoric to his advantage he began to help people think critically and form their own opinion. Terrill's term "catalytic rhetoric" refers to how Malcolm X would present a speech in a way that would make people think and come to the conclusion and interoperate what was being said and then the audience would take action as they saw necessary to fix the problems mostly about race in their communities.

His speeches were not only intended for African Americans, but also Whites who were equally important to persuade for a change even if it meant going against the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X's public speaking, according to Terrill, is a model of radical criticism, and we can see his speeches not simply as the means to liberate, anti-racist end but as a " theory of rhetorical action" (p. 17). Terrill mostly discusses the progressively more critical voice that Malcolm X launched against the Nation of Islam's principle in his last year.

During this period, Malcolm X asked African Americans to hold tight to both the ballot and the bullet, employing each strategically and not becoming ideologically reliant upon either one. At the same time, Terrill maintains that this rhetoric forged a sense of shared identity and purpose among his

African-American listeners that allowed them to translate their critical questions into modes of action. Most know that joining the Nation of Islam Malcolm X turned away from a life of crime and spent more time and energy on the teachings of Muhammad, this is where he formed his platform on most racial issues and his desire to empower African Americans to better themselves and their futures. However, Terrill makes the argument that the Nation of Islam prevented him from speaking out, and to more diverse people which is what Malcolm wanted, calling Elijah Muhammad's teaching "rambling apocalyptic visions" (p. 105). While Terrill's primary argument centers on Malcolm X in his last year of life without the Nation of Islam, he places this material in context by comparing it to Malcolm X's rhetoric within the Nation of Islam and other speeches.

This I found to be one of the more interesting parts of the book looking at well-known African American authors and comparing their work with Malcolm X's style. Terrill uses the approach of looking at African American "prophetic" speakers from the past to examine the way they influenced Malcolm's speeches. He looks at four speakers that use prophetic protest: Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Conservation of Races", David Walker's "Appeal", and "The Confessions of Nat Turner" (p. 62).

He compares Douglas with Malcolm by showing how they both talked to the white community and understood the importance in changing the way that they thought, since they were the majority and the most effective way of change is having more people on your side (p. 62). This collection of speeches Terrill calls the prophetic speech a key method of African-American

protest rhetoric. Through a breakdown of prophetic texts by Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, David Walker and Nat Turner, Terrill distinguishes between the jeremiad (a long complaint) and the apocalyptic style (unrevealing of future) of prophetic communication.

While the jeremiad (shown in this text by DuBois and Douglass) retains faith in the possibility for American social change, apocalyptic texts (shown by Walker and Turner) claim that only a radical break will bring about the golden age anticipated by religious prophesy. Terrill acknowledges the crucial role that the prophetic tradition has played in African-American organizations and texts and locates the Nation of Islam's rhetoric within this tradition.

Such rhetoric contributed to the reputation and steadiness of the Nation of Islam and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) as radical organizations, as it offered consistent projects for identification and action. Prophetic rhetoric model was challenging approach for it was often times confusing and made it hard to understand for listeners and readers. The Nation of Islam taught participants to see straight references to Elijah Muhammad and the African-American struggle in the Bible just like how Frederick Douglass asked his readers to interpret the Constitution as an anti-slavery document.

Terrill ultimately sees such models of reading to harsh not letting the audience come to conclusions by themselves and created too much of an emphasis on God and pre-determined. But while he states early on that he will reject the prophetic tradition for its strictness, Terrill goes on and on about prophetic history for practically half of the book. Following an

extensive reading of the four texts by Douglass, DuBois, Walker and Turner, Terrill traces the prophetic tradition until he reaches the Nation of Islam (NOI).

Painting a bad picture of the nation Terrill says that the NOI walked the line between reformism and revolutionary sentiment by combining socially conservative and politically disengaged action with an apocalyptic vision of the American future (p. 78). During his almost rant about the Nation of Islam he tends to over look the clear fact that Malcolm X is a highly recognized public figure because of that organization. Through out the book his undertone leaves almost a bad taste in your mouth as Terrill speaks so poor of the Nation.

Terrill proceeds to outline Malcolm X's speech, from a strict association with the Nation of Islam's tradition of prophetic with strict rhetoric, then moving toward a gradually more open dialogue with concrete politics and social critiques. Through close readings Terrill identifies the beginnings of Malcolm X's afterward-rhetorical review in his early speeches, while maintaining that only in his final year did Malcolm X move productively beyond prophecy and begin to model " radical judgment. The year before Malcolm X died Terrill argues he " worked to break his audiences free from the confines of the dominant whiteculturewhile at the same time helping them avoid becoming trapped within another set of restrictions" (p. 110). Terrill states several times, the year before Malcolm X's death that was the time when he gave the most influential messages and used his rhetorical skills to fulfill hisgoals, for African Americans to become rhetoricians themselves. This being said it

is the purpose of this book to prove that Malcolm X was trying (through his speeches) to teach African Americans to think for themselves.

After doing so to maintain their freedom it becomes critical that they do not fall into like minded thinking again especially with white people, but by doing that they will fall back in to the repression they were in. Malcolm X's need to communicate more effectively with his audience was a major factor in his split with the Nation of Islam and one that has been basically ignored by scholars. Terrill sees Malcolm X as first and foremost a public speaker, and the Nation of Islam's prophetic rhetoric ultimately became confining in his attempt to address political as well as religious matters.

After his break with the NOI, Terrill notes an increasingly individualist style in Malcolm X's rhetoric. Disillusioned by the hierarchical structure of the NOI, he rejected its rigid narrative structures and began to preach " radical flexibility. " (142) In doing so Terrill argues, Malcolm X aloud his audience to develop a " trickster consciousness," questioning both hegemonic and extremely cruel anti-hegemonic doctrines (p. 171). He repeats many times that African Americans should become more critical of the world around them, and question things to better themselves.

That African Americans should not support an action without knowing all of the details and judging it for themselves. This is the major key role that Malcolm wanted his listeners to understand that if they can think more critically about the world around them than they can become more independent from disheartening world. While stating multiple times that Malcolm X desires his listeners to be individual thinkers, Terrill towards the

end of his book turns away from the intense independence often connected with trickster-style questioning of doctrines.

Combined identity remained important to Malcolm X's project. According to Terrill, Malcolm X's late speeches were a form of "constitutive rhetoric" that helped define the audience as part of a collectivity. The switching of the ideas towards the end of the book tend to be a bit confusing since through out the book the main idea is independent thinking then switches back to collective thinking. This idea of radical critique did not appear simply in such obvious statements.

Terrill argues that it was shown in Malcolm X's rhetorical choices, as when Malcolm criticized his Black audience members for unthinkingly supporting a Democratic Party that had done little to advance the civil rights movement. Instead, he urged them to use their voting power more strategically "Don't register and vote — register!" He meant this in a way that he believed that most of the politicians in that day were not looking out for the black man so do not vote for them just because you can vote, because no matter who you vote for none of them are concerned with the black man.

As he broke down the social definitions that trapped his African-American audience members, the inner rationality of his rhetoric allowed them to redefine themselves as members of an aggressively African community. This delicate relationship between individualism and collectivism, Terrill argues permitted listeners to continue their own perspectives of radical judgment, but it did not cause stable activist organizations. Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) and the Muslim Mosque, Inc. (MMI) never

achieved the stability of more traditional, hierarchical organizations such as the NOI.

These were programs that Malcolm X started after leaving the Nation of Islam. “ The post-Malcolm histories of his OAAU and MMI serve as concrete reminders,” Terrill tells us, “ that this sort of radical critique cannot easily sustain a traditionally defined political movement. ” (185) Terrill’s investigation is useful in its focus on how Malcolm X’s rhetoric fully affected his audience. There is no uncertainty that Malcolm X’s words formed his audience’s perceptive of themselves and of the political environment. It opened them up to tools of critical investigation.

Terrill sees this effect as Malcolm X’s major solid involvement to the essential anti-racist struggle. Turned off by the hierarchical organization and “ closed narratives” of the Nation of Islam, Terrill says that Malcolm X’s post-NOI language does not interpret easily into ordered political movements. Instead it creates a community of important individuals who cannot be brought in by the limitations of hierarchical political movements, though they may “ assemble momentarily ... coherent texts, motives, and identities. ” (191) This part of the book Terrill comes close to allowing Malcolm X to reduce into a poststructuralist realm of open.

Taken up from all blocked ideologies, Malcolm X and his listeners can apparently act only temporarily, in short-lived moments of shared action. Terrill is absolutely right to recognize Malcolm X’s desire to question and revise structures of thinking, but he underestimates the potential for solid political group, even hierarchical organization, that continue in Malcolm X’s system of “ radical judgment. ” Even though Terrill continues to state that



Malcolm X's rhetoric instructs listeners to stay away from giving into hierarchical structures, he restricts his own study of organizational forms influenced by Malcolm's radical conclusion to Malcolm X's own organizations that he started. The MMI and the OAAU, on the other hand were by no means the only organizations that relied greatly upon the rhetoric of Malcolm X's last year. Neither did Malcolm himself analyze his own organizations as the necessary leaders in the movement. He saw his organizations as structures planned to increase a principles, and he strained the potential for partnership work involving similarly organizations.

Even though Malcolm might have been to some extent only seen other organizations to their face value, we might look to other organized embodiment of Black independence to see his observation come alive. We may see the different gathering of organizations frequently known as the Black Power movement as an over used organizational personification of Malcolm X's radical judgment. Malcolm X's everything has been used name, image and words have been adopted by numerous Black Power groups and continue to be adopted.

But we might also read Malcolm's iconic status as the celebration and enactment of his radical judgment. A mixture of organizations acted out Malcolm X's rhetorical tradition of critique and fighting through their personal organizational structures and existing ideologies. The Black Panther Party used heavily Malcolm X's support for self-defense much like how Malcolm used Douglass and others, his perseverance upon the need for instant survival programs, and his argument that African Americans should think strategically about using both the ballot and the bullet.

The Panther's rebellious principles and militaristic party authority might turn Terrill off, but never the less they were a clear example of an organizational understanding of many of Malcolm X's ideas. Panthers enacted the critical judgment that Terrill sees in Malcolm X's rhetoric without rejecting all forms of organizational hierarchy or denying their dependence on ideology. Terrill shows Malcolm X as a beneficial social critic who gave his audience the tools they needed to resist.

He offers a central idea when he shows us Malcolm X's speeches as resourceful models of evaluation that do not basically teach facts. Malcolm X's rhetoric encourages listeners to build such critiques independently. Malcolm's rhetoric was not simply a means of group classification but a movement to collective action. Through out this whole book Terrill makes very strong comparisons with other well-known African American authors. Doing this really helps readers connect more and gain a better understanding to what

Terrill was trying to prove through out the book. To me the book was a bit lengthy in some parts where in others it could of used more emphasis on. The book had a simple topic and that was Malcolm X style of rhetoric and how his speeches helped his listeners become more critical analyzers. But at the end of the book Terrill points out how Malcolm ditches his platform and persuades his followers to become more collective, it made the book seem inconsistent and lost most of its argument.

This book would be beneficial for people to read because it does show how Malcolm X's rhetorical style was different than most. Only argument to be made is that the later half of the book contradicts the rest of what Terrill was

trying to prove and therefore made the book illegitimate. The good is that Terrill broke the book down into 3 different sub sections, which also made the book easier to read. Again also the side-to-side comparisons helped Terrill make a concrete argument. Overall a good book but the lengthiness in some parts made it a little boring.