
RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Confinement to Enlargement: The Shift in Malcolm X's Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

This is a comparative study between Malcolm X's speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet," and his Ford Auditorium address, which reveals a shift in rhetoric. Malcolm X's rhetoric changed from being separation-laden, calling for a black counter-cultural hegemonic orientation of black nationalism, into being more inclusive of all races and advocating for the "brotherhood of all men." This paper explores the process, the reasons and the implications of this shift in rhetoric.

KEYWORDS

Malcolm X, rhetoric, shift, hegemony, confinement, enlargement, civil rights, pragmatics, shift, America.

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1. Introduction

Malcolm X was a major figure in the civil rights movement in segregated America. The development in Malcolm's rhetorical repertoire is, in many ways, distinct, for his rhetoric underwent a fundamental shift. Suffice it to compare his first speeches with his last ones to detect not only a change in the tone but also in the perspective of Malcolm's approach to the issues of racial separation and integration in America.

The shift in Malcolm X's rhetoric is largely determined by his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964 and all the visits to African countries that followed it. Malcolm X's approach to civil rights changed from being exclusionist of racial and cultural minorities other than African Americans to an integrationist approach that embraced all racial and cultural minorities, including Whites. This change in rhetoric is reflected in the counter-cultural hegemony rhetoric reflected in the speeches he delivered during separate times of his life as a civil rights advocate.

2. Literature Review

There are several critical perspectives about the change in Malcolm's rhetoric. Thomas Benson's *Rhetoric and Autobiography: the Case of Malcolm X* sees the change in Malcolm's rhetoric as a projection of several changing events that permeated his life. Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca is considered a major episode that caused him to incline more towards the brotherhood of all people, which completely contradicts some of his early statements that black people do not like the company of foreigners.

Terrill's *Malcolm X's Rhetoric for the International Arena* further supports the argument that Malcolm's shift in rhetoric is a direct result of two main events. First, there is the rejection of the teachings of the Nation of Islam and its leader, Elijah Muhammad. Second, there is Malcolm's travel to Mecca to acquaint himself with Sunni Islam.

Lucaites and Condit's *Culturetypal and Counter-cultural Rhetoric in the Martyred Black Vision* investigates Malcolm X's counter-cultural rhetoric as a way to achieve the legitimacy of the civil rights struggle. It is, in a way, a re-negotiation of cultural equality through redefining black culture as a distinct cultural entity that opposes white culture.

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Artz and Murphy provide a profound investigation of the concept of cultural hegemony in America. They maintain that the undermining of African Americans from American history and culture had an impact on the image of the African American's contribution to American history. In this way, cultural hegemony, being a way by which "moral, philosophical, and political leadership that a social group attains only with the active consent of other important social groups," was not beneficial to African American, for it did not entirely recognize their fundamental contributions to American history (1). Faced with the historical negligence of African Americans' role in establishing American history, African Americans started redefining themselves by making sense of their own history.

Dyson's *Open Mike* is a comprehensive collection of interviews with scholars on several themes that relate to race in America. Dyson investigates the different notions of race in American identity. He makes an important distinction between white identity, white ideology, and white institutions. According to Dyson, whiteness as an identity refers to a set of social practices and group beliefs that make up the white segment of American society (99). Dyson makes the important claim that whiteness only existed due to the presence of redness and blackness in its immediate environment. In other words, "white people's sense of themselves as being white is contingent on a negation of a corollary redness and blackness, and...the assertion of that blackness as the basis of competing racial identity" (100).

The concept of whiteness as an ideology is closely related to an ideology of supremacy and domination. Such supremacy and domination have their roots in the colonial period. Anglo-Saxon Protestants and American colonists, both white, led a frivolous political and military struggle against each other. Thus, after the foundation of the United States, whiteness was set as a unique cultural singularity. Independence was perceived as an end product of a long struggle against British colonial oppression. Although racial minorities played an important role in bringing about independence, the struggle for independence was primarily perceived as a white struggle. The fact that the founding fathers were all white is an additional symbolic illustration of the early white dominance and supremacy in cultural, social, and political arenas.

Dyson's idea that Whiteness cannot exist in a uni-cultural realm is important to understanding Malcolm X's advocacy for counter-cultural hegemony. It is crucial for any hegemonic cultural system to have some type of compromise between the dominant majority and subordinate minorities. The white majority has long dominated the American cultural and political arena, maintaining that white cultural and social values are the norm and that other cultural frictions need to be part of the overall white culture.

3. Methodology

The shift in Malcolm X's rhetoric brings about several questions about its nature, purpose, and effect. How did this change take place? Most importantly, how did this change in rhetoric manifest itself? These and other questions are central to understanding Malcolm X's philosophy. They also help formulate an understanding of the civil rights movement in the United States. The study of the shift in Malcolm X's rhetoric is also fundamental to understanding the impact of the philosophy of Black Nationalism on the civil rights movement.

This study is a comparative rhetorical analysis of two texts by Malcolm X. The first text is Malcolm's "The Ballot or the Bullet." This speech was delivered in 1964 before the change in Malcolm's perspective occurred. Accordingly, it is representative of his separation-laden rhetoric. The second text is Malcolm's speech at Ford Auditorium on February 12th, 1965, following the bombing of his house. This text is an illustration of Malcolm's later rhetoric of integration.

3.1 Context:

The Nation of Islam was introduced to the fabric of the civil rights movement as a religious movement of resistance whose political values often intertwined with its religious beliefs. The Nation of Islam was not the sole religious group with a political agenda to deal with civil rights in America. Along with the Nation of Islam, a representative of the Islamic faith, as the name points out, were several other religious organizations that had political aspirations. For instance, the Black Jews of Harlem were a religious group that identified with the Jewish faith and claimed that the oppression that Black Jews were suffering from in America was similar to the one Hebrews faced in ancient Egypt. Another instance of religious and political civil rights movements is the Moorish Science Temple of America, whose founder, Noble Drew Ali, called for embracing Islam as "the true religion of black people" (Robinson, 34). Accordingly, the creation of the Nation of Islam was not a random event. It happened within a political environment that permitted the co-existence of several religious groups with a similar vision: the emancipation of black people.

Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam, was an influential figure who shaped Malcolm X's political intellect. Elijah Muhammad's vision was at the basis of Black Nationalism. Elijah Muhammad's vision was centered upon the separate existence of black people. This separate existence is not purely social but also political, economic, and, most importantly, cultural. Separate

black businesses owned and controlled by black people, a black culture that is a source of pride and jubilation, and social solidarity between black people were among the pillars of Black Nationalism.

Malcolm X's advocacy played a major role in spreading the vision of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm acted as an effective representative of the nation of Islam. He was also the voice of the movement among the urban black working class. Thus, "in sermons, on the street corners, and in lecture halls, Malcolm X effectively and eloquently explained his black Islamic nationalism. His appeal stemmed partly from his ability to present himself as an 'authentic' voice of the black urban community, in contrast to a seemingly more detached middle-class leadership" (Robinson, 40).

3.2 Analysis:

Confinement and enlargement are two key themes that describe the two distinct phases of Malcolm rhetorical development. Confinement characterizes his early rhetoric within which Malcolm divided society into a white controlling majority and a black manipulated minority. He called for a complete cultural separation from the white majority. He saw "the white man" as a counter-cultural force that aimed at controlling black masses, depriving them of their rights, and aiming at marginalizing them culturally and politically. For example, in the Ballot or the Bullet speech, Malcolm maintains that:

"You [black people], today, are in the hands of a government of segregationists, racists, white supremacists...they'll lynch you in Texas as quick as they'll lynch you in Mississippi. Only in Texas, they lynch you with a Texas accent; in Mississippi, they lynch you with a Mississippi accent." (www.americanrhetoric.com).

In contrast to confinement, enlargement describes Malcolm's rhetoric after it changed. After he recognized that racism was influencing his actions, he became an advocate of "whoever and whatever is for the benefit of humanity." (www.americanrhetoric.com). His task became to get the audience to redefine itself as a distinct social, cultural, and political power.

The shift in Malcolm's Rhetoric constituted an invitation for the public to redefine itself in terms of the role of the civil rights movement, its contingencies as well as its goals. The oratory aspect of Malcolm's rhetoric of civil liberty and racial equality was often judged as a failure to come up with a viable agenda of social reform. However, several critics of Malcolm's advocacy had another approach to evaluating his speeches and saw in Malcolm's oratory preferences a rejection of a system of advocacy and reform imposed by the dominant culture. They saw in Malcolm's advocacy a revolt against a Hellenistic reform tradition initially imposed by white culture. In this respect, Malcolm often criticized Martin Luther King's approach to advocacy as passive and ineffective. In the "Ballot or the Bullet" speech, for instance, he mentions:

Anytime you live in the twentieth century, 1964, and you're walking around here singing "We Shall Overcome," the government had failed us. This is part of what's wrong with you [black people]: you do too much singing. Today, it's time to stop singing and start swinging. You can't sing up on freedom, but you can swing up on some freedom. Cassius clay can sing, but singing didn't help him to become the heavyweight champion; swinging helped him become the heavyweight champion (www.americanrhetoric.com).

Malcolm's rhetoric aimed primarily at bringing about a revolution rather than re-stressing collective awareness of the race issue amidst the African American community. There are two events that redefined Malcolm rhetorical experience. First, he separated from Elijah Mohammad's Nation of Islam. This event not only gave Malcolm X a chance to free himself from the rigid and dogmatic system of political and religious belief that constrained his aspirations of political leadership and social revolution. The second event that had a major impact on Malcolm's rhetorical career was his Hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca was not solely a spiritual experience; it was also an experience that led him to re-define some political beliefs and previous assumptions he held about issues of race and civil liberties in America. Accordingly, since Hajj Malcolm's intellect underwent a transformation:

Since I learned the truth in Mecca, my dearest friends have come to include all kinds—some Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, and even atheists! I have friends who are called capitalists, Socialists, and Communists! Some of my friends are moderates, conservatives, extremists—some are even Uncle Toms! My friends today are black, brown, red, yellow, and whites! (Benson, 5).

"The Ballot or the Bullet" is one of Malcolm's speeches that was delivered shortly after he left Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. It is also a speech that is descriptive of his early exclusionist rhetoric. In "the Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm calls for a total separation from white culture, symbolized by the "white man," whose sole purpose is to maintain the social, economic, and political subservience of black people. Accordingly, the "white man" was perceived as "the Devil" who is incessantly seeking to undermine black people through imposing a foreign culture on them, depriving them of their political and civil rights, and preventing them from fully expressing their own culture. To this respect, Malcolm argues:

If you go to jail, so what? If you're black, you were born in jail. If you're black, you were born in jail, in the north as well as the South. Stop talking about the South. As long as you're south of the Canadian border, you're South (www.americanrhetoric.com).

"The Ballot or the Bullet" constitutes a harsh critique of the American political system. It positions the political leadership of the United States as a group of racist white people who have tricked the African American community into the use of their valuable vote. Malcolm maintains that African Americans have a strong impact on the political system. The majority of African Americans, however, were not entirely aware of their power as a strong voting entity:

You look at the structure of the government that controls this country; it's controlled by 16 senatorial communities and 20 congressional committees that run the government, 10 of them are in the hands of Southern segregationists. Of the 20 congressional committees that run the government, 12 of them are in the hands of Southern segregationists. And they're going to tell you and me that the South lost the war.

Each time the white vote was evenly divided, whether in presidential or congressional elections, the African American vote played a paramount role in deciding who will go to the White house and who will stay in the dog house (www.americanrhetoric.com).

In the above passage, Malcolm clarifies that although the African American vote played an important role in shaping American political leadership, it lacked effective representation at the level of administration. An overwhelming majority of African Americans voted for the Democratic Party in Congress as well as a Democratic candidate for the presidency. In fact, African Americans identified more with the Democratic Party. They believed that voting for a Democratic president would bring about a positive social reform that would advance the civil rights issue. However, the predominantly democratic administration that controlled both houses of Congress at the time did little to pass legislation granting African Americans the equality they are entitled to by the constitution of the United States.

The two-facedness with which the democratic administration dealt with issues that concern the African American community created among the latter a general feeling of dissent, dissatisfaction, and frustration. "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech was an opportunity for Malcolm to express his frustration with the current administration:

Despite the fact that you are in a position to be the determining factor, what do you get out of it? The Democrats have been in Washington D.C. only because of the Negro vote. They've been down there four years...all legislation they wanted to bring up, they brought it up and gotten it of the way, and now they bring up you. And now, they bring up you. You put them first, and they put you last, cause you're a chump, a political chump. (www.americanrhetoric.com).

For Malcolm, it was beyond doubt that the government ruling the country was a group of segregationists, racists, and white supremacists. He criticizes the fallacy of some African American voters who take it for granted that a Southern Democrat will effectively deal with the issues of the South. In addition, Malcolm's autodidactic style was characterized by a narrow perspective that was grounded on collective guilt. All white people were evil in that they were the cause of the suffering of African Americans. In addition, they control government positions and refuse to grant African Americans their most basic civil rights.

Malcolm delivered the Speech at Ford Auditorium, Detroit, in 1965. In it, he maintained that African Americans were not unique or distinctive as a minority, for they had a lot in common with the formerly colonized African people in that both underwent subservience and oppression by a privileged elite. The Detroit speech was an important platform that Malcolm used to underline the importance of the United Nations in solving the race issue in America. In fact, among the major aspects that characterized the shift in Malcolm's rhetoric was an inclination towards a more international aspect of the issue of civil rights in the United States.

After the shift in Malcolm's rhetorical philosophy took place, and after he succeeded in redefining his own understanding of the race issue in the United States, Malcolm X understood that the solution to the race issue could come from the United Nations, giving the civil rights issue and international appeal. Accordingly, the United Nations, as a vanguard international institution, became an important entity in the vision that Malcolm X had of social and racial equality in an American system, which, at the time, leaned more towards segregation.

Malcolm believed in using the United Nations as a platform for charging the United States for human rights violations. Malcolm X's movement from domestic to universal perception of the civil rights issue is crucial to the understanding of his rhetoric. As a matter of fact, it is important to consider the universal perception of the civil rights issue when analyzing Malcolm's rhetoric, for by giving the civil liberties issue in America a universal dimension, Malcolm positioned the civil rights issue in the international arena, making it possible to bring it under the umbrella of the United Nations as a legal issue that needs to be solved.

Malcolm's movement to the international arena also permitted him to craft an inclusive rhetoric. This rhetoric is inclusive because it suggests integration instead of separation and enlargement instead of confinement. This rhetoric was new to Malcolm's oratory tradition. An analysis of the early speeches of Malcolm X reveals a tendency towards separation and counter cultural hegemony. According to Benson, the shift in Malcolm's rhetoric manifested itself for the first time in 1965, when he was giving a speech in Rochester, NY. Henceforth, and after he underwent the transforming spiritual experience of going to Mecca for pilgrimage, his rhetoric became more inclusive of white people. As Malcolm's audience grew larger and more diverse, he started recognizing the racism that influenced his actions. In his own words, he became "for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole." (Benson, 2). Within a few years, Malcolm moved from identifying with himself and family to identifying with his race and finally to all mankind.

4. Results and Discussion

Malcolm's life is a gradual growth in perspective, from confinement to enlargement. The powerful opening in perspectives that Malcolm experienced resulted in his embracing of larger groups of people. Malcolm's shift in rhetoric shows the polarity of racism and counter-racism that he was entrapped in.

Malcolm's vision of equality requires that there be two separate cultural entities that share the same amount of political influence and power. Malcolm X saw equality as the empowerment of the self, present only in the condition of opposition. The rhetoric of separation that characterized his political and social advocacy was pivotal to his efforts to counter the cultural hegemony that was more beneficial to whites. Hegemony refers to the "process of moral, philosophical and political leadership that a social group attains only with the active consent of other important social groups" (Artz and Murphy, 1).

Malcolm's approach to dissolving the strong cultural hegemony was the political philosophy of Black Nationalism. In his speech "The Ballot of the Bullet," he defines Black Nationalism as:

The political philosophy of Black Nationalism only means that the black man should control the politics and the politicians of his own community. The time when white people can come into our community and get us to vote for them so that they can be our political leaders and tell us what to do and what not to do is long gone (The Ballot or the Bullet).

Black Nationalism is not a purely political philosophy but also an economic one. The economic philosophy of Black Nationalism means that:

We [black people] own and operate and control the economy of our community. You can't open up a black store in a white community. White men won't even patronize you. The white man is too intelligent to let someone else come and gain control of the economy of his community (The Ballot or the Bullet).

The "Ballot or the Bullet" is representative of Malcolm's vision of counter-cultural hegemony. This speech, which is also representative of Malcolm's early cultural separation aspirations, also calls for a total separation from white culture, symbolized by the "white man," whose sole purpose is to maintain the social, economic, political, and cultural subservience of black people. This type of counter-cultural hegemony is meant to position black culture as not only equal to the white one but as superior to it. What this rhetoric advocates is a triumph of the black race over the white one. Accordingly, the "white man" was perceived as "the Devil" who is incessantly seeking to undermine black people by imposing on them a foreign culture, depriving them of their political and civil rights, and preventing them from fully expressing their own culture.

Malcolm's rhetoric of counter-cultural hegemony was meant to set an example for a viable agenda of cultural assertion. The point Malcolm was making positioned African American culture as a superior culture. He challenged the long-held assumption that Eurocentric culture is the model culture to be followed. Instead of conforming to white culture, Malcolm was for the development of African American culture away from any cultural, social, or political influences it might be subject to. As Malcolm chose an assertive, aggressive approach to civil rights, he advanced Black Nationalism as a reform agenda for black people. Black Nationalism, as outlined in "the Ballot or the Bullet," is a complete political, socio-economic, and cultural agenda that serves the benefit of the black masses. The cultural aspect of Black Nationalism found in separation from white culture a radical solution to the long subordination that black culture was subject to. Finally, Black Nationalism was a way by which black culture could be redefined in such a way as to unite the black masses under the umbrella of an independent African American culture.

5. Conclusion

The American civil rights movement was a platform that challenged long held assumptions about race in America. As a matter of fact, the civil rights movement was revolutionary in that it brought to the table a new conception of civil liberties by maintaining that the future of America intertwined with establishing equality in all aspects between its ruling majority and the other minorities.

Among the figures that advocated an equal America was Malcolm X. Malcolm X's advocacy was characterized by its several phases. In his early years as a member of Elijah Mohammed's Nation of Islam, Malcolm's ideas were separatist in their nature. In this phase of his civil rights advocacy, he called for a complete social, economic, and, most importantly, cultural separation from whites. Thus, Malcolm X pioneered a tradition of counter cultural hegemony that called for a cultural independence of the black people. This counter cultural hegemony implied a separation from mainstream cultural forces in an attempt to challenge the dominant hierarchical structure of American society.

The civil rights movement played a paramount role in redefining African American identity. Civil rights figures such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and others remain forever engraved in the social and political conscience of African Americans. A fundamental aspect that makes up the American civil rights movement is the multitude of, sometimes contradicting, approaches that were taken by civil rights activists to tackle the sensitive issues of equality and race. For instance, Martin Luther King's approach was pacific. He called for an equal and integrated American society in which blacks and whites can be equal. His approach to reaching this goal was based on peaceful protest, civil disobedience, and cultural integration. On the other hand, there were advocates who had a totally different approach to civil rights; the most famous of these advocates was Malcolm X. Malcolm X's approach to civil rights was distinct, for Malcolm primarily advocated a complete separation from a political and economic system controlled by the white majority. Most importantly, however, Malcolm envisioned a cultural separation. Through a counter cultural hegemonic rhetoric, he maintained that black culture is not only equal to the white one but is even superior to it in several aspects. Malcolm's vision of equality requires that there be two separate cultural entities that share the same amount of political influence and power. Malcolm X saw equality as the empowerment of the self, present only in the condition of opposition. The rhetoric of separation that characterized his political and social advocacy was pivotal to his efforts to counter the cultural hegemony that was more beneficial to whites.

It is important to take into consideration some episodes in Malcolm's life as a young man that affected his worldview in general and his understanding of the race issue in America in specific.

Additionally, "the Ballot and the Bullet" speech and the Ford Auditorium address are two representative speeches that illustrate Malcolm's rhetoric of separation and integration. Although Malcolm had his own view of integration, which did not necessarily agree with the one other civil rights activist such as Martin Luther King adopted, the fact that his political philosophy changed from separation to integration allowed a change in his entire understanding of civil rights advocacy.

Naturally, this study has limitations. One main limitation of the study is that it focuses primarily on the comparative analysis of two speeches by Malcolm X. This comparative analysis seems rather minimalistic since it includes only two speeches.

Further research might take into consideration more speeches as a database for a more comprehensive comparative analysis. In addition, further research might include a linguistic study of the speeches that applies the theories of semantics and pragmatics.

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