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MALCOLM X – FREEDOM FIGHTER OR
RACIAL DIVIDER

Malcolm X – Freedom Fighter or Racial Divider

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990 Words

Malcolm X who fought for millions of African Americans trapped in the vicious cycle of racism, has been celebrated as well as scorned for his accomplishments. His confrontation of American racism has been contested in various ways by different historians, as either inspired by idealism or hatred of White America.

Born in Omaha, Nebraska, 1925 Malcolm X, previously Malcolm Little, experienced the impact of racism from a young age. Like generations of African Americans, he suffered racist harassment, such as when his house was burned down by white racists when Malcom was four years old. He went on to embrace the Nation of Islam, a political religion encouraging the independence of the black man and rejection of white superiority. These factors would later inform the views he espoused as part of the Civil Rights Movement. Malcom X is a figure who was controversial both amongst his contemporaries and in modern interpretations. A key area of contestability concerns the beliefs Malcom X proclaimed, where some interpret him as having promoted racial justice and equality, others believe his bold actions and speech promoted divisions between black and white Americans.

Malcolm X forced African Americans to look at the truth and reality of their condition by speaking up for all the oppressed, becoming a leader for African Americans in the hopes of gaining them a better position in society. An incident which can be viewed as supporting this interpretation occurred in Harlem, 1957, when Hinton Johnson, a fellow member of the Nation of Islam, was savagely clubbed on the head by police. In response, Malcom X led a demonstration in Harlem against police brutality towards African Americans, ultimately winning the largest settlement NYC had ever paid. This propelled Malcom X to national prominence, the crowd outside swelled to almost 4000 and was the first-time black men in Harlem had seen a black organization take a strong stand against the police. Malcolm X continuously reminded White American's of their racism and challenged the establishment, which made him a controversial and highly divisive figure.

Malcom X sought to encourage black pride and honour diverse racial backgrounds and heritage. This view Malcolm X adopted and spread to African Americans, instilled hope that they would be able to show pride for the race they had been born into. When Malcolm X first joined the Nation of Islam, there were only a small number of members, however within years it had surged from 400 to 4000, due to his popularity. The changing point in their lives came from Malcolm's determination to make black pride ubiquitous throughout the race, which challenged the ideas of American society at the time. However, this positive vision of Malcom X's legacy is not universally shared.

We cannot forget Malcolm X's goal throughout his fight for freedom, which was to relieve the suffering of African Americans and give them rights and a new societal position in America. Rights to self-defence, economic independence and social equality were the vision that Malcolm X sought to achieve. This belief is encapsulated in his quote: "I am not a racist... I believe in human beings, and that all human beings should be respected as such, regardless of their colour." Malcolm X fought for freedom and respect for African Americans instead of scorn and judgement based on skin colour. His hope in making blacks equal in society was a contested idea, at the time.

However, his place in history has been contested because whilst Malcolm X uplifted the black man's consciousness, he continually referred to the white man in a negative light, causing hate to be produced as a result. This drove the wedge between the two races even further apart, with Malcolm

X referring to white man as devils and frequently speaking about them as inferior to black people, almost hypocritical as he was teaching Americans to fight this racial stereotype themselves. 1959 television documentary 'The Hate That Hate Produced' on the Nation of Islam was an important contributing factor to increasing the notoriety Malcolm X had among whites, even though the shows validity could be questioned due to bias. One of his speeches displayed was the "I Have a Nightmare" speech which said, "I charge the white man with being the greatest liar on earth... the greatest adulterer on earth... the greatest deceiver on earth". This speech conveys Malcolm X's feelings towards white people, "charging them" with cruel feats, arising hate against them. This view Malcolm X contributed to him being contested, mainly in the fact that people thought he was preaching hate rather than freedom.

Malcolm X's emphasis of self-defence also caused him to become a contested member of society, with some interpreting these beliefs as a call for violence against whites, scaring white Americans to believe they were going to be attacked or treated violently.

"...if a four-legged dog attacks me for demanding rights that I'm deserved because I'm a human being, I'm going to shoot that dog. And then I'm going to shoot the dog's owner who allowed it to attack me. I don't call it violence when it's in self-defence. I call it intelligence."

In this quote, Malcolm X compares the dogs to racist white people, and the dog owner to the corrupt American government encouraging white supremacy. Therefore, this quote exercises his belief that violence is necessary. Martin Luther King emphasised non-violence and integration with all races, whereas Malcolm X believed freedom, self-respect and dignity is not achieved this way. Malcolm X even regularly criticised King's methods, believing King was bowing down to the people that had historically abused and belittled them. This made Malcolm X even more controversial as he discouraged King's peaceful method, making it seem like he wanted to take a more violent, vicious stance.

Malcolm X represented different things to different people, but it is undeniable that he made a difference to freedom and justice in America and the world. Some interpret his words as having inspired truth and racial justice and equality, whereas others interpret his legacy as being one of violence and perpetuating racial divisions. Irrespective of the reality, this makes Malcolm X an important means through which we can understand the Civil Rights Movement and a seminal, contested figure in American history and nationwide equality.

Annotated Bibliography

Aljazeera.com. 2017. *Malcolm X And Martin Luther King*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/face-to-face/2017/07/malcolm-martin-luther-king-170709072506322.html>> [Accessed 1 July 2020].

In this article, the author compares the two most prominent figures in the Black Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm X and Dr. King. It provides an account of each leader's beliefs and methods for how they would accomplish equality for African Americans. This source mainly recounts quotes and facts on the two and their different ways of elevating the black race, making it objective as personal opinions are not evident.

2017. *The Hate That Hate Produced (1959) | Malcom X First TV Appearance*. [video] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsYWD2EqavQ>> [Accessed 5 July 2020].

This television documentary gives a perspective of white Americans during Malcolm X's time. It was created in 1959 by white Americans to expose the Nation of Islam, the political religion Malcolm X was a member of. It can be considered quite a biased primary source as it was created by white people to highlight the negative aspects of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Even though the source is biased, it allows for a comparison between the views of Malcolm X and the white race. It references the "I Have a Nightmare" speech which is valuable as it reveals Malcolm X's beliefs of the white man's character.

X, M., Haley, A. and Younge, G., 1965. *The Autobiography Of Malcolm X*.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X is a book that gives a detailed perspective of Malcolm X's life and beliefs, told by Malcolm X himself with the help of writer, Alex Haley, the fact that it is an autobiography contributes to it being bias. However, the source must be bias as only then would the reader be able to fully understand Malcolm X's viewpoints. The book is useful as it gave an insight into Malcolm X's childhood experiences that shaped his character later on.

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