

Laura Post

SOCI 100

The Makings of Malcom X

The average person knows very little about Malcom X. In fact, before learning about him in this class, my limited knowledge of him merely included his role as a civil rights activist in the 1960's. Come to think of it, this was about all the information that was provided to me in my history classes. After learning more about Malcom X's life, out of curiosity, I began to ask my friends and family what they knew about him. The most common response I received was the notion that he was the more violent leader in the civil rights movement as opposed to MLK Jr. This dangerously simplistic view of Malcom X doesn't come close to truly representing who he was and the way in which his views changed throughout his life. Malcom X was a very complex man, and just like any human in society, his values, beliefs, and political views were influenced by the constant process of socialization. Throughout Malcom's life, he experienced different social interactions that each had a unique influence on his point of view on the world, particularly about race. It is important to look at each of these periods within his life and analyze the effects from a sociological point of view. By doing this, we can better understand the complex makings of the iconic, historical figure known as Malcom X.

According to the book, *Ten Questions*, socialization is defined as "the process by which we are taught to think and act the way we do" (Charon 118). In other words, it is the ongoing result of socializing throughout a person's life that ultimately influences their values, beliefs, and views on the world. For example, one's family, friends, and teachers are all people that may

affect the way in which their personality develops. Socialization is a continuous process that transpires throughout a person's entire life, constantly changing and shaping their personality.

The earliest and perhaps most influential factor in the process of socialization is a person's immediate family, especially in early childhood when most or all of a child's time is spent interacting with family members. From their parents, children are taught societal norms and expectations, as well as specific values that the family finds important. For example, one family might emphasize the importance of higher education, while a different family teaches their children to focus on technical skills. Because of this, a child in the first family might be more likely to attend a four-year college, while a child from the second family might prefer to go to a trade school for a more hands-on job.

For Malcom X, there were many ways in which his parents influenced his belief systems. Both Malcom's mother, Louise, and father, Earl, shared an interest in social justice and political activism. Louise and Earl dedicated their lives to the teachings of popular leader Marcus Garvey who did not oppose segregation but instead emphasized that people of color should establish their own separate businesses and educational organizations. The Little children were raised to value the principles of Garveyism, which promoted the idea of black nationalism. These principles also included the importance of "self-mastery, willpower and hard work" (Marable 17). To develop a strong work-ethic as Garvey teaches, the Little children were each given specific personal responsibilities, including taking care of their own portion of a garden. This taught each child to value hard work and recognize the payoffs from their own accomplishments. Furthermore, to try and introduce the children to Garvey's Pan-African perspective, Malcom's parents read their children various African American and Caribbean newspapers to learn about current events that were prevalent to the lives of black people around the world. This influenced

the Little children to feel a sense of connection to all people of African descent, a core concept of black nationalism.

Seeing his father as a role model, Malcom readily absorbed these teachings, and held onto many of them later in his life. Malcom's parents' passion for politics surely influenced his drive for activism, and many of Malcom's beliefs followed the same ideas as Marcus Garvey and his parents, establishing a push towards black empowerment and independence. For much of Malcom's life, he believed that people of color must take control of their own lives and live completely separate from white people who he believed would never willingly give black people the equal rights they deserved in America. This quite obviously stemmed from the lessons he learned as a child. Malcom also took on a Pan-African perspective that he most likely learned from reading about African culture and current events in his family home.

Another factor that influenced Malcom in his early childhood was the death of his father. Because of Earl Little's outspoken attitudes on black nationalism, the family was consistently being threatened by the KKK. In 1931, Earl Little was most likely killed by the Black Legion, although it was ruled an accident by officials (Marable 31). In witnessing this, Malcom had his first experience of racial violence, which surely fueled his disdain towards whites expressed in his early teachings.

After Earl's death, Malcom's mother Louise suffered a mental breakdown, sending Malcom to a juvenile home where he attended an all-white school. This changed his environment for socialization and therefore began to differently influence his thoughts on the world and himself. His new white teacher became an agent in his process of socialization, telling Malcom that his dream of becoming a lawyer was unrealistic. His teacher offered instead that he should pursue a career doing something with his hands. This was just one of the many ways Malcom

was realizing how white people were attempting to keep him in his place of oppression. This also added to the list in Malcom's mind of the unfair and discriminatory actions taken against black Americans by the white majority. Malcom's teacher's advice deterred him from working towards his dream, and as a result, his grades began to drop as his attention towards school lessened.

After a while, Malcom was sent to live with his half-sister Ella where he was soon exposed to street life and crime. Another important figure in Malcom's socialization, his sister Ella proved to be a poor role model as she was arrested on multiple occasions for theft, and assault and battery in an attempt to make money to support her family. This influenced Malcom into viewing crime as sometimes a necessary way to survive. Also, during this time, Malcom met another black teenager named Malcom "Shorty" Jarvis. Shorty became an important agent in Malcom's process of socialization, guiding him into street life and crime. He was quickly taught about "hustling, petty thievery, and seducing women" (Marable 43). However, soon enough, this life of crime led Malcom to be arrested and sentenced to 10 years in prison, introducing a new environment for the process of socialization to change his life yet again.

While in prison, Malcom entered a period of great intellectual growth after meeting another prisoner named John Elton Bembry. Bembry taught Malcom the importance of education and influenced him to start studying and reading again. He encouraged Malcom to leave behind his life as a hustler and use his intellect to communicate his strong political views. Malcom studied at the prison library, read dictionaries, and learned how to express reasoned arguments. Because of Bembry, Malcom's life had suddenly turned upside down as he left his previous life of drugs and crime behind to pursue a more adequate education.

While still in prison, Malcom was first introduced to the Nation of Islam by some of his family members who had converted. Malcom's brother Reginald told him about the Nation's

leader; a black man named Elijah Muhammad who believed that all whites are devils. Thinking back to his parents, whose lives were destroyed by white supremacists, Malcom felt a connection to Elijah's statement. After also contemplating every relationship he had ever had with a white person in his life, Malcom agreed that each one was a negative encounter. This realization influenced his opinion of whites to be even more severe than before. Ultimately, Malcom decided to join the Nation of Islam and began following the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. He started to pray every day and wrote letters to Elijah expressing his views on his teachings.

After being released from prison, Malcom's studies of Islam continued. One of Elijah's central teachings was that black people were stolen from Africa, enslaved, and then brainwashed by white people. In this process, black people had lost their true African name and culture. This was what prompted Malcom to change his last name from Little to X, representing the lost African name he would have had if his ancestors had not been taken from their homeland. Malcom attended temple meetings and gained special attention from Elijah Muhammad himself. Elijah spoke about Malcom as an example of someone with strong faith in him, and even allowed Malcom to speak at many of the meetings. In doing this, Malcom X developed a unique rhetorical style that eventually became a tool he used to recruit more people into the Nation.

Soon, Malcom was one of the main figures representing the NOI because of his strong communication skills and ability to recruit new members using similar tactics as he did in his past life as a hustler. Malcom's new celebrity status influenced him to discuss his views on race to the public, and the more Malcom followed Elijah Muhammad, the more his negative feelings towards whites intensified. He began to publicly criticize other civil rights leaders, calling them "Uncle Toms." His public statements reached a shocking peak when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and Malcom expressed that the murder was "the chickens coming home to roost,"

proposing that the assassination was warranted. As Malcom's attachment to the Nation of Islam grew stronger, he began to view Elijah Muhammad as more of a god than a human, and Elijah became the biggest influencer in the process of socialization in Malcom's life at this time.

However, after spending so much time and energy praising Elijah Muhammad, Malcom discovered some startling information. Elijah had had multiple affairs with secretaries within the Nation of Islam, many of which resulted in children. After more tension between Elijah and Malcom, and even an attempt on his life ordered by the Nation of Islam, Malcom tried to distance himself from the NOI. This pushed him to dive deeper into his pursuit of black political independence on his own.

Malcom created his own organization called "Muslin Mosque, Inc" in Harlem, New York. Soon after, however, Malcom determined that it was time to make his pilgrimage to Mecca, a pillar of the Islam religion. During this journey, he revered the way in which the Muslims in Mecca were of all different races, all united together with the same views and values. This greatly influenced his current perspective on race in the United States. Malcom had spent most of his life advocating for black nationalism because of the influence of his parents, Elijah Muhammad and the negative interactions he had with white people. However, after his trip to Mecca, Malcom completely changed his stance on racial integration. When he returned to the United States, he apologized to the other civil rights leaders who he had criticized and decided that the only way to gain equal rights for black Americans was to work all together. Malcom now believed that integration was a possible solution to the race issues in America.

With such a 180-degree change in Malcom's attitude, it was difficult to get the American press to acknowledge his new outlook, and they continued to display Malcom in a negative light as a hater of white people. This is why our history books often leave out this realization in

Malcom's life, and why many people do not know about the way in which Malcom's views changed throughout his life. Malcom's pilgrimage to Mecca was one of the biggest turning points in his life, and the people that he interacted with while there influenced his process of socialization which forever changed his view on race in America.

Overall, throughout Malcom's entire life, his views were influenced by the constant process of socialization. Starting in his childhood home, under the influence of his parents and Marcus Garvey, Malcom learned important ideas that he held onto his entire life. In his adulthood, he continued to change as he embraced the life of crime, but then eventually switched his life around by joining the Nation of Islam. Even after making a break from Elijah Muhammad and the NOI, he made yet another development in his outlook on race in America during his pilgrimage to Mecca. Malcom X's life is proof of the power in our interactions with the people around us and how they can completely change our outlook on the world.

For the creative project on Malcom X, I painted a portrait of him with many different shapes and colors making up his image. I was trying to communicate that it is too often that people view Malcom X as a one-dimensional character and choose to ignore the depth and growth he developed throughout his life. In my painting, you can more easily see all the underlying elements that made Malcom X who he was. Each shape and color represent a different agent in the process of socialization in his life that influenced his outlook on the world.

In conclusion, it is clear that Malcom X's life was full of dimension and change, something people don't often acknowledge. Throughout Malcom's life, he experienced different social interactions that each had a unique influence on his point of view on the world, particularly about race. After looking at each of these periods within his life and analyzing them

from a sociological point of view, we now have a better understanding the complex makings of Malcom X.

Works Cited

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