# Reimagining Malcolm X: Street Thinker Versus Homo Academicus

*Seyed Javad Miri*
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At 84-pages, *Reimagining Malcolm X: Street Thinker Versus Homo Academicus* by Seyed Javad Miri is more of a booklet than a book. In fact, like most of the 40 books on sociology and religion published by this scholar, many of which are self-published or released by subsidy publishers, it falls into that awkward category between an essay that is too long and a book that is too short.

Considering the fact that most university and independent academic presses place profit and marketability before contribution to scholarship in the field, the fact that ambitious and prolific academics seek to be proactive and find alternate modes of sharing their scholarship should be commended. Consequently, scholars working in the field of sociology and religion should be grateful to both Miri and the University Press of America for making this work on Malcolm X available to readers and researchers.

*Reimagining Malcolm X* examines the significance of el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz as a social theorist by analyzing his views on race, academia, philosophy, and politics. The work is divided into four chapters: "Novel Strategies of Interpretation," "Undisciplinary Fields of Knowledge," "Violence, Religion, and Extremism," and "The Epic of America."

In chapter 1, Miri points out that "Malcolm X has not been appropriated within the body of academic social sciences as he should have been" (p. 9). This is both obvious and intentional. It is heartening, however, to see that interest in Malcolm's thoughts has extended to certain segments of Iranian academia. As the author reveals, however, some Iranian scholars are reticent to see the value of Malcolmian theories and concepts (p. xi). Despite all of its revolutionary rhetoric, the Islamic Republic of Iran has shown little interest in el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz. On the contrary, it has preferred to invite his nemesis Louis Farrakhan, a man who admits that he created the conditions that lead to Malcolm's assassination, to preach at the seminary in Qum. Considering that the Iranian regime considers itself the bastion of Shi'ite orthodoxy and cracks down on both political critics and practitioners of *taṣawwuf* (*'irfān* or Sufism), it is ironic that its leaders have promoted a man who believes that W. D. Fard was the incarnation of Allah and that Elijah Muhammad, as opposed to Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah, was Allah's final

messenger. I suppose it is called political expediency. Others would call it hypocrisy.

In chapter 2, the author asserts that "the critical theory of Malcolm X is not based on hatred" (p. 30). Although this is evident to those who objectively immerse themselves into his life, thought, and works, the general attitude toward the man has been marred by subjectivity. I speak not of scholarly shortcomings of individual academics, but rather of a systemic attempt to misrepresent his religious and political ideals with the determined aim of presenting him as a hate-filled racist and separatist. By focusing on the pre-Makkan Malcolm, who posed no serious threat as he simply supported the status quo of racial segregation, the academic sector, which serves as the think tank for the Establishment, thereby ignores or dismisses the post-Makkan Malcolm, who posed a danger of global dimensions by encouraging African-American Muslims to unite with the world's Muslims and incited black Americans as a whole to join forces with oppressed Arabs, Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans.

In chapter 3, Miri addresses the timely issues of violence, religion, and extremism. He writes that "American scholars have been able to … minimize the importance of Islamism or Political Islam in Malcolm X's frame of analysis" (p. 37). However, he admits that "he has not developed very extensively on Islamism in his critical theory but there are ample references that he has not taken Islam solely as a form of devotion but a way of political strategy in rectifying the ills of society" (p. 37). Absolutely not: never. One cannot speak of the "Islamist position of Malcolm X" (p. 38) due to the fundamental fact that he was not an Islamist. Malcolm was introduced to the Muslim Brotherhood during his studies in Egypt. He was intimately familiar with their thought, methods, and aspirations – and roundly rejected their interpretation and their fundamentalist approach. He was critical of both ultra-conservative and ultra-liberal Muslim societies. In fact, rather than follow an Islamist model that merged religion and politics, he made a clear distinction between both by founding the Muslim Mosque, Inc. to cater to the spiritual needs of African-American Muslims and the Organization of Afro-American Unity to promote Pan-Africanism and the political aspirations of black Americans.

Nor can it be claimed, as Miri does, that "If Malcolm X was alive he would surely have argued against those who encourage Palestinians to 'turn the other cheek'" (p. 50). Malik Shabazz had enough sense to know that there are times to use force and there are times to use diplomacy. He supported any moral and ethical means that worked. Not only are suicide bombings against civilians sinful and criminal, they are not a logical and effective mode of re-

sistance. There is a major difference between legitimate armed resistance and terrorism. Unfortunately, in advancing his arguments, Miri employs citations from the pre-Makkan Malcolm that were subsequently rejected by the post-Makkan Malcolm. Malcolm X became Malik el-Shabazz. He rejected the Nation of Islam and embraced Orthodox Islam. He rejected racism and nationalism and embraced universal humanism. Although he believed in self-defence, he had moved beyond calls for bloody revolution and was actively engaged in diplomatic efforts in the Arab world and Africa as well as at the United Nations.

In chapter 4, the author writes that "If I would try to find a contemporary equal to Malcolm X in the 20th century I cannot but choose Ali Shariati from Iran" (p. 55). If Miri seeks a comparable figure in Iran, then, perhaps, he is correct. Like Malcolm, Shariati (d. 1977) was more of a "Modernist" Muslim than a "Radical" Islamist. However, there are plenty of other figures who come closer to Malcolm, such as Nelson Mandela (d. 2013), Steven Biko (d. 1977), Patrice Lumumba (d. 1961), and even Martin Luther King, Jr. (d. 1968), particularly during his final days when he reassessed some of his views and strategies and started to move closer to Malcolm X in many ways.

As for the attempt on the part of Takfiri terrorists to appropriate Malcolm X, this is both untenable and unpalatable. In fact, it serves the very agenda of those who oppose him, namely, to discredit him by associating him with violence. The author also stresses that "we need to understand his conversion from Christianity to Islam and also his transformation from the Nation of Islam to Islam as a socio-political worldview and more importantly the paradigm-shift of Malcolm X from being at the *service of religion* into a view of religion that considers itself at the *service of humanity*, i.e. The authoritarian model versus emancipative model of religiosity" (p. 61). Indeed. I agree.

In his epilogue, Miri concludes that "Malcolm X qualifies as a highly acclaimed social theorist" (p. 80), an obvious observation made by anyone who has read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, a 1965 collaboration between jouralist Alex Haley and Malcolm X, or his speeches. The author, however, poses a pertinent question, one that is particularly relevant in relation to cultural or heritage Muslims: "Whether 'we' are 'house Muslims' or 'field Muslims'" (p. 81). He takes this line of questioning to a higher degree, asking to what extent we are "house intellectuals" or "field intellectuals" (p. 82). Miri ventures to suggest that "the vast majority of Muslims, as far as their relationship to power/knowledge--giving colonialism and the virtual ubiquity of its reconfiguring 'Islam'--fall into the category of 'field Muslims'" (p. 82). "A significant portion of 'Muslims' in the West," he claims, "are probably a

mixture of the two ('house Muslim' and 'field Muslim')" (p. 82). I strongly disagree with this assessment.

Although many revolutionary Iranians can be hailed as "field intellectuals," this label certainly does not apply to a large segment of the country's population, which literally worships the West. I would argue that many of the world's Muslims remain colonized mentally and culturally. It is not uncommon to see half of a country's population eagerly embracing modernity while the other half struggles, precariously, to maintain tradition. Ironically, there is the paradoxical situation of the Islamist/jihadists who violently attack the modern world when they themselves are its very product.

If Miri views the Muslims from the Islamic world as idyllically revolutionary in nature, his view of western Muslims is mixed, for he believes that they combine elements from both the "house Muslim" and the "field Muslim." In other words, they side with the System while objecting to some of its aspects. Who, however, does he describe when he speaks of "Muslims in the West"? If he is talking about immigrants, then I would certainly agree. Historically, Muslim immigrants have identified with the white power structure. They embraced the "American Dream" that was nothing but an "American Nightmare" for the indigenous peoples and people of African ancestry.

Rather than side with the oppressed, Muslim immigrants identified with their oppressors and sought to integrate and assimilate into American society. With rare exceptions, they manifested no desire to make common cause with African Americans in their struggle for justice and human dignity. The fact that many of the progressive forces in the black community identified as Muslims was immaterial. The Muslim immigrants who arrived in the early twentieth century preferred to be identified on the basis of their skin color rather than on the basis of their religion. They preferred to be listed as "white," to Anglicize and Christianize their names, than to identify with African Americans who openly, and proudly, professed to be Muslim. Consequently, western Muslims of immigrant origin have been overwhelmingly "house Muslims" with only rare exceptions exhibiting some "field Muslim" and "field intellectual" traits. As for western Muslims, with only rare exceptions, they have been primarily "field Muslims" and "field intellectuals."

Finally, if it is not obvious enough already, the subtitle itself, *Street Thinker Versus Homo Academicus*, poses problems. Malcolm X was not a street thinker. He was a self-educated man who was also traditionally trained by Elijah Muhammad who, in turn, had been trained by W. D. Fard. Although many of their teachings were unorthodox, heterodox, and even heretical from the point of view of mainstream traditional Islam, they all formed part of a direct

mentor-to-student chain of transmission. If Malcolm X was not a street thinker, a derogatory description if there ever was one, neither was he a *homo academicus*. Malcolm X repeatedly observed, sometimes with chagrin and regret, that he had no formal higher education. If he was not a scholar or an academic, he was, nonetheless, an organic intellectual and an outstanding one at that.

Despite the annoying prevalence of misprints throughout this short study, something that could easily have been avoided by means of proper proofreading, *Reimagining Malcolm X* is a welcome addition to the biography on one of the most dynamic and inspiring African-American intellectual activists of the twentieth century. The work also helps draw attention to a forthcoming anthology of academic articles, titled, *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary*, which is edited by both Dustin J. Byrd and Seyed Javad Miri.

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