

The Emergence of Black Nationalism

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Abstract

Black Nationalism emerged in the early nineteenth century because African Americans felt a disconnect between American ideals—liberty, independence, democracy—and the everyday realities—slavery, racism, oppression—that they faced because of their skin color. Early proponents of Black Nationalism were often free blacks struggling to make their way in a white-dominated society. Booker T. Washington and others promoted an economic version of Black Nationalism as a solution to African Americans' plight. Writer and activist, Marcus Garvey, integrated these three themes—political, economic, and cultural nationalism—into one ideology that rejected white values and embraced blackness on its own terms (Grant, 2008). Stokely Carmichael defined the concept of Black Power as “a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community” (Hamilton, 1967). This meant “Black leadership for black goals” (Franklin, 1988). The Nation of Islam, or Black Muslims appealed their followers “for separation from whites rather than integration and for violence in return for violence” (Carson, 1996). The key speaker for this movement was Malcolm X, known for his critique of the non-violent methods of civil rights movement. It is a widely known fact that Martin Luther King before his death, had been extensively criticized by more militant African Americans, arguing that whites would never act in response to their nonviolent actions. In 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale organized the Black Panther Party in Oakland, USA, inspired by Malcolm X's call to “freedom, by any means necessary”.

Keywords: Black Nationalism, Marcus Garvey, Black Panthers, Black Power, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael

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Introduction

As J. Herman Blake writes, Black Nationalism emerged in the early nineteenth century because African Americans felt a disconnect between American ideals-liberty, independence, democracy-and the everyday realities-slavery, racism, oppression-that they faced because of their skin color. Early proponents of Black Nationalism were often free blacks struggling to make their way in a white-dominated society. These individuals argued that the American system of slavery and racial hierarchy would never allow for political equality and justice for African Americans, so the only hope was for African Americans to establish a separate country of their own elsewhere. When the Civil War ended slavery in the United States, Black Nationalists ended their calls for emigration and looked forward to exercising the new political freedoms they gained in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments (Blake, 1969).

Nevertheless, African Americans still faced discrimination in education, employment, housing, and other areas after the war, and in the South especially, African Americans were still disenfranchised thanks to poll taxes, literacy tests, and other Jim Crow efforts to exclude them from voting (Cole & Ring, 2012).

Booker T. Washington and others promoted an economic version of Black Nationalism as a solution to African Americans' plight. Washington "argued that white Americans would view African Americans as worthy of equal treatment if African Americans could prove their usefulness in areas such as industry and agriculture. White Americans would also see African Americans differently if the latter raised themselves out of poverty, either through industrial and agricultural education or through black businesses that supported self-sustaining black communities. Both strategies involved racial solidarity and self-help

in economic activities; unlike political nationalism, both strategies also emphasized integration into mainstream American society" (Blake, 1969).

Marcus Garvey

Writer and activist, Marcus Garvey, integrated these three themes-political, economic, and cultural nationalism-into one ideology that rejected white values and embraced blackness on its own terms (Grant, 2008). After the World War One, African Americans had high expectations, however they had vanished in the reality. They had fought distinguishably in the war and expected at least some acknowledgement "that they too were equal citizens". Racial tensions increased with the return of black troops and increased numbers of African Americans which moved into urban areas. Between the period of 1917 to 1919, race riots exploded in East St. Louis, Chicago, Tulsa, and other cities. Whites were demonstrating that did not intend to treat African Americans any differently than they had before the war. All of these made Garvey think that the integration would never be possible and "that only economic, political, and cultural success on the part of African Americans would bring about equality and respect" (ibid.219). In 1917 Garvey organized the headquarter of UNIA in New York. By the middle of 1919, the organization had more than 30 branches. It has been a long discussion about the exact number of members of the organization, however, everyone agrees that "it was clearly the largest mass organization in African American history. Its membership has been estimated between two and four million" (ibid.223). According to Franklin, the number of members of UNIA "were perhaps half a million members" (Franklin, 1988, p.321).

Gutknecht argues that "Garvey's political movement may be identified as the form of emerging

urban nationalism" (Gutknecht, 1982, p.86). Mr. Garvey's extensive appeal to the race pride gave him a wide popularity. He showed off his blackness, arguing that black meant strength and beauty. Moreover, "he asserted that Africans had a noble past, and he declared that Negroes should be proud of their ancestry" (Franklin, 1988, p.320).

"The white man of America will not, to any organized extent, assimilate the Negroe, because in so doing, he feels that he will be committing racial suicide. This he is not prepared to do. It is true he illegitimately carries on a system of assimilation; but such assimilation, as practiced, is one that he is not prepared to support because he becomes prejudiced against his own offspring, if that offspring is the product of black and white; hence, to the white man the question of racial differences is eternal" (Amy Jacques-Garvey, 2009, p20).

It is important to underline, that he criticized the black middle class, for adopting the lifestyle of the white society, as for lower classes he eagerly identified with them. According to Franklin, Garvey's principles had a captivating impact on the "unlettered and inexperienced Negroe urban element. Thousands hailed him as the true leader of the Negroe race" (Franklin, 1988. P 321).

Garvey strongly supported the idea of blacks returning to Africa and building up their own country. Garvey believed that blacks were prejudiced for the reason of not accomplishing significant changes; for not building nation and government on their own and for being dependent politically and economically on whites.

According to David Van Leeuwen, Garvey's "philosophy and organization had a rich religious component that he blended with the political and economic aspects", and for "Garvey, it was no less than the will of God for black people to be free to determine their own destiny. His organization took as its motto "One God! One Aim! One Destiny!" and looked to the literal fulfillment of Psalm 68:31: "Princes

shall come out of Egypt: Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God" (Leeuwen, 2000).

In 1918 he issued the newspaper, the *Negro World*. By 1920 had a circulation between 50,000 and 200,000.

Marcus Garvey did his best to encourage the members of African American community to be proud of their legacy and proud of their looks. He appealed to African Americans to see themselves as members of a great race. "We must canonize our own saints, create our own martyrs, and elevate to positions of fame and honor black men and women who have made their distinct contributions to our racial history." Garvey Declared, "I am the equal of any white man; I want you to feel the same way" (ibid).

Marcus Garvey requested the permission from the League of Nations for establishing a colony in Africa. He organized the Universal African Legion, that wore military attire. Other organizations were the Universal Black Cross Nurses, the Universal African Motor Corps, the Black Eagle Flying Corps and the Black Starr Steamship Line.

As Franklin notes, Marcus Garvey proclaimed "the formal organization of the Empire of Africa and appointed himself provisional president" (Franklin, 1988, p.320).

Together with black nationalism, Garvey advertised capitalism, telling his people that economic success was the effective way of achieving independence. From 1919 the newly established the Negroe Factories Corporations was selling stocks for African-Americans. UNIA had some small businesses, grocery stores, laundries, and restaurants, along with larger ones, including a printing plant and a steamship line, the Black Star Line. The company was intended for those who wished to return to Africa. the shipping company finally proved to be unsuccessful owing to mismanagement, expensive repairs, and corruption. In 1923 Marcus Garvey went to the trial, being accused in certain kind of fraud. He was found guilty and put to the prison for 5 years. President Coolidge pardoned him in 1927. Marcus Garvey had been deported from

the country. In 1940 he died in London. It must be said that even though UNIA had a vast number of followers and Marcus Garvey had been regarded as very magnetic leader, who was able to lead the masses, his personality and his appeal for black separatism had been denounced by other black leaders. The idea of blacks emigrating to Africa, according to DuBois and James Weldon was simply "a form of escapism" (Coombs, 2004, p.227).

Van Leeuwen interestingly notes that by 1922 Garvey had a position "of separatism mixed with just enough cooperation. He applauded whites who promoted the idea of sending African Americans back to Africa" (Leeuwen,2000). Furthermore, in 1922 he even had a meeting with one of the leaders of the Ku Klux Klan, to talk about the Klan's outlook "on miscegenation and social equality" (ibid).

The UNIA did not survive without its charismatic leader and eventually collapsed. Undoubtedly Marcus Garvey had been an extraordinary person, whose ideas about black identity and black pride provided a bases for the ideology of other organizations.

In the mid-twentieth century especially, this integrated form of Black Nationalism often served as a counterpoint to racial integration movements. Black Nationalists in the 1960s and 1970s included Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, as well as Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, founders of the prominent Black Panther Party. These groups and individuals frequently emphasized Black people's right to self-determination, or their right to decide their own form of government and control their own lives. In the process, they encouraged individuals to hold leaders, Black, white or otherwise, accountable for their decisions. Like their predecessors, Black Nationalists in the 1960s and 1970s also emphasized independence from Anglo-American culture, and promoted a shift towards (or back to) African society and culture (a movement known as Pan-Africanism) (Rhodes,2001).

Stokely Carmichael and Black Power

After the assassination of Dr. King Stokely Carmichael declared "The people who killed King, had declared the war on us. When white America killed Dr. King they had no reason to do it at all. He was one man of our race, who taught love and compassion" (Carmichael, 1968).

Black violence took the form of rioting in northern inner cities. It must be outlined that, the positive gains from the civil rights had come mainly to the South. Even though, Northern blacks had the right to vote, though it was minimal and were not subject to Jim Crow Laws, most of them lived in poverty. There were low earnings along with high unemployment rate, with limited opportunities for skilled jobs. From 1964, they went out to the streets, destroying and burning everything on their way. The culmination was King's assassination when 168 cities burst out rioting.

One of the factors which triggered the rise of the black nationalism in the 1960s, was very slow progress towards equality for northern blacks. According to, Cleyborne Carson, during the period from 1955-1965,

"African American political thought, according to this widely accepted narrative, moves from the reformist, integrationist orientation of King to the revolutionary black nationalism of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panther Party. Non-violent civil rights protests gave way, it is said, to mass movements toward black liberation" (Carson, 1996, p.116). The militant Black Panther Party scared everyone with "its denunciation of the values of white America" (ibid).

However, the movement had several positive effects. Black nationalism instilled and promoted pride in black history and black culture. By the end of the decade, US colleges and universities were beginning to institute black studies programs. More black citizens were voting than ever before, and their voting power was evident: increasing numbers of blacks were winning election to public office. In 1967 Cleveland's

voters elected Carl Stokes, the first black mayor of a major American City (Franklin, 1988, p.533). By 1969 black representatives were able to form the Congressional Black Caucus.

In 1966, the chairman of SNCC, after his arrest in the James Meredith "March Against Fear" chanted the famous words "We want a black power!" Carmichael argued that the Black Power was a better tool to be used in the struggle for civil rights compared to nonviolence method. The members of SNCC thought that some of the leaders of the movement, were not "pressing hard enough and might be willing to settle for less than full equality" (ibid.455). It must be underlined that by the 1970s, it was quite common for a black group to reject "offers of white support" (ibid). Carmichael was constantly under the surveillance of FBI, he felt threatened from the government and in 1968 Carmichael left America and moved to Guinea.

Stokely Carmichael defined the concept of Black Power as "a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community" (Hamilton, 1967). This meant "Black leadership for black goals" (Franklin, 1988).

Carson argues that "rather than continuing to develop the radicalism of the early 1960s, many black power advocates abandoned the radical perspectives that grew out of the civil rights movement in favor of racial separatist ideologies" (Carson, 1996, p.118).

Malcolm X and The Nation of Islam

The Nation of Islam, or Black Muslims appealed their followers "for separation from whites rather than integration and for violence in return for violence" (ibid.120). The key speaker for this movement was Malcolm X, known for his critique of the non-violent methods of civil rights movement. However, Malcolm X was aware that the Nation of Islam was not capable to offer different choice "to black people facing vicious white racists in the South". (ibid). Moreover, he was

aware that his own organization would not reject the opportunity of making deals with white people for the sake of their own interests. In 1961 despite his criticism of civil rights activists for working with white liberals, he was sent to Atlanta" to negotiate a mutual non-interference agreement with the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1964 when Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam, he established Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). Malcolm recognized the radical potential "of what he called the grassroots forces of the civil rights movement" (ibid.121). For the sake of common interests and solutions he was ready to forget the past criticism "I've forgotten everything bad that the other leaders have said about me. and I pray they can also forget the many bad things I've said about them" On July 31st, 1963, in his letter addressing Martin Luther King Junior, he appealed for the united front during the racial crises "If capitalistic Kennedy and communistic Khrushchev can find something in common on which to form a United Front despite their tremendous ideological differences, it is a disgrace for Negroe leaders not to be able to submerge our "minor" differences in order to seek a common solution to a common problem posed by a Common Enemy" (Malcolm X, 1963).

In 1965 he was assassinated during his public speech. It is important to underline the fact that after his death, black power militancy was hostile towards any black leader who advocated nonviolent tactics and racial integration, while Malcolm acknowledged that non-violent tactics were an essential part of any persistent mass struggle.

An assassination of John Kennedy in 1963, the murder of Malcolm X in 1965, the murder of quite a number of civil rights activists in the mid-sixties, and the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, all of these for many African Americans have been the symbol of "the rejection by white America of their vigorous but peaceful pursuit of equality" (Franklin, 1988, p.459).

The Black Panther Party

It is a widely known fact that Martin Luther King before his death, had been extensively criticized by more militant African Americans, arguing that whites would never act in response to their nonviolent actions. In 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale organized the Black Panther Party in Oakland, USA, inspired by Malcolm X's call to "freedom, by any means necessary".

The Black Panther Party appealed for full employment, black control of the black community, decent housing and were fighting against the oppression and brutality.

What differentiated this organization from other political organizations, was that they were fully focused on their goals. It must be underlined that the founders of this party, Newton and Seale were the representatives of working-class black men. "They didn't share either the middle class assumptions of the nationalists, or the liberalism of the white left" (Black Flag, No215). They tried to meet the needs of their own community. The BPP succeeded because they saw that it was necessary to work out some practical to offer to those communities' they worked in. They succeeded because they put working class communities' actual needs above theory. (ibid). The party became famous during the time, when 30-armed Panthers went to the California state legislature to protest a new gun control bill. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) asserted that the BPP was

subversive and dangerous. Every measure has been taken to weaken this radical organization and by 1980, nothing has been left from the previous "glory".

Conclusion

The most successful Back-to-Africa campaign was led by Marcus Garvey in the 1920s and his ideas of black pride and economic independence greatly influenced later black nationalists such as Malcolm X, who in turn influenced activists such as Stokely Carmichael, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Angela Davis, and others. In the heightening racial tension of the late-1960s, activists such as these helped form the notion of Black Power as we think of it today.

Black power asserted pride in blackness, when black people were constantly being told that blackness was subordinate to whiteness. It was a way for black people to express their frustrations against the white power structure, token integration and reform, and unfulfilled promises of equality and justice. Although shaped as so by the media, Black Nationalism was not a movement to overthrow the government. It was a push to improve the government and enforce the due process clause of the 14th amendment that states all people should be protected equally under the law. Throughout US history black independence and nationalist movements have been tied to the struggle for economic and social equality as well as a deep commitment to racial pride.

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