Red Black and Green: Garvey and Garveyism in Caribbean - American Month

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Red, Black and Green: Remembering Garvey and Garveyism during Caribbean-American Month

Here in America as we begin the commemoration of Caribbean American month, and in the context of the recent death of civil rights activists- Dorothy Height, Ossie Davis- for example, and the remembrance of the anniversary of Malcolm X assassination, and the untimely death of Walter A Rodney in Guyana, it is appropriate that we also remember Marcus Josiah Garvey and the legacies of his philosophies, on both West Indian Americans and African Americans here, but also on Blacks in the Diaspora and the homeland, mother Africa.

Garvey’s early history is well known. From his birth in Jamaica, his attempts to fight racial, class and color discrimination in his native Jamaica, and later in Costa Rica, Panama, Cuba and other lands to which West Indians had emigrated to look for employment. His rebuff by the local colonial authorities and class interests, his formation of the United Negro Improvement Association, UNIA; first in Jamaica, and later here in the USA where it became one of this country’s largest social movements – and certainly the largest mass movement among African Americans, albeit of the lower classes. His conflict with the established cohorts in the black community here-intellectuals such as WEB DuBois, ministers, union leaders such as A. Philip Randolph, and his targeting by the repressive forces in the state, as exemplified by J Edgar Hoover who made his initial debut by “busting” Garvey, through the use of black informants and other undercover “agent provocateurs” - a pattern the state and Hoover would later utilize toward other fighters for black emancipation- Malcolm X, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, Stokeley Carmichael[Kwame Toure] and W.E.B DuBois – for example, with much success in terms of neutralizing them, fragmenting their movements and ultimately aiding in their demise and/or assassination or death.

What then were the essential features of Garveyism: 1) a former mentor and dear friend, black Sociologist Alphonso Pinkney stated it well when he states that Garvey’s philosophies could be adequately subsumed under four main headings: a) Territoriality; b) Economic nationalism; c) Cultural nationalism; and finally, d) Religious nationalism. With these I concur. For Garvey it was essential for the upliftment and emancipation of the ‘Race’ that Africans in the Diaspora reclaim territory as a way of reclaiming the glorious past of African civilization and unrivalled success of yesteryear.

So at home in Africa where colonization was rife, and here in the USA and other parts of the Diaspora, it was necessary for blacks by necessity, to repatriate to help rebuild mother Africa and, in other ways, fight to regain territory and to control the elites in nation states. Garvey’s notion of Pan Africanism infected many leaders, worldwide, and led to the ultimate independence of countless African and Caribbean nations, as well as impacting the civil right movement here in the 1960s.

The reversal of “Blackness” as a source of pride, and not negativity, was the core of his cultural nationalist urgings, and this was reechoed in the Harlem renaissance, the Black Power and “black is beautiful movement” here in the U. S. A and the diaspora, and also in the creation of negritude, soul and other forms of group identification. Nina Simone—“To be Young Gifted and Black” and James Brown – “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud”, were the early precursors for the Naomi Campbell, Denzell Washington Ophra
Winfery, and other well known icons in the black Diaspora. His urgings and impact were not limited just to Blacks but also had an influence on Edna Manley, the mother of Michael Manley, as she pioneered the way in the Caribbean for a positive redefinition of blackness in Caribbean art.

Influenced by Booker T. Washington and his philosophies of self help and economic upliftment Garvey, although not a political accommodationist, espoused the ideology of black economic emancipation through the ownership of businesses and other economic ventures. True, many of these ventures failed in that Garvey was duped by worthless and cunning “con artists”- some whites- who duped him into buying and paying exorbitant prices for faulty merchandise [ships] which were not sea worthy. But his other economic ventures newspapers, businesses, for example, were successful, for a while. Later, the nation of Islam adopted much of Garvey’s economic nationalism in their teachings and, for a time, had much wealth and numerous holdings, and inculcated and socialized in their followers the notion of entrepreneurship and self employment.

Today, some of these ideas are reflected in the successes of such noted West Indian Americans as Bruce Llewellyn, Coca Cola and J Earl Graves of Black Enterprise, for example, and in the slight edge West Indian Americans portray in entrepreneurship among the native Black population in this country.

Least successful was Garvey’s attempts at religious nationalism. Although religion was infected by slavery and other philosophies of injustice and in egalitarianism, Blacks were reluctant to replace their white Madonna’s and saints with black ones and, moreso, Garvey was countervailing against one of the most effective and powerful institutions in the African American community. It was from this cohort that much of the leadership and wealth in this community lay, and their elites were not about to give it up without a struggle. However, to Garvey’s point of using religion as a transformative force, one need look no further than the rise and spread of black liberation theology and the success in America of the Reverends Flake, Butts and Youngblood on the east coast, for example, as they use theological principles-some grounded in Garveyism -to unabashedly and economically empower African Americans and other diasporic blacks here in the USA. And we should not forget the path breaking and riveting spiritual teachings of Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson and T.D. Jakes for example- which help indicate that Garvey’s influence can be found not too far beneath the surface.

Yes, Garvey was charismatic but yet mortal, and had many inadequacies which led to the downfall of his movement. Some were personalistic: high egotism, too high a reliance on “friends” rather than proven experts, stubbornness and dogged inflexibility. But there were also structural and societal reasons, not the least of which was the reluctance of local African Americans and whites to power share with this visionary leader at the turn of the twentieth.

It cannot be disputed, however, that in death his legacies and philosophical underpinnings took hold and influenced generations throughout the African diaspora and the “homeland-Africa. So as we don our Red, Black and Green symbolic buttons and other iconic emblems, as we contextualize the successes of many within our midst –Spike Lee, Cicely Tyson, General Powell, Sidney Poitier, Lois Farrakhan, Barack H Obama and the like-let us celebrate the persistence, resilience and fortitude of this great West Indian in the Diaspora.
I am reminded of a little known but pivotal speech by President Bush given in July 2003 at Goree Island, Senegal, when he stated: “By a plan know only to Providence, the stolen sons and daughters of Africa helped to awaken the conscience of America. The very people traded into slavery, helped set America Free”. Garvey was such a person, I submit.

He, Garvey, earlier grasped what President Bush then described as “The power of economic and political freedom to lift whole nations and put forth bold plans for Africa’s development”. Clearly, Garvey was such a visionary leader whose philosophical place in America and the black Diaspora will continue to be a stellar one. Let us therefore continue to salute and celebrate this visionary West Indian leader as we celebrate Caribbean American month in our nation. Remembering always that success in whatever form- micro or macro- depends on us, our resilience, our networks, our “can do” attitude, and not on any messiah, not even our current 44th President Barack H Obama jr.

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