

Garvey's Race First doctrine

Excerpts from "Race First and Self-Reliance" by Tony Martin

Source: *Race First*, by Tony Martin, (Dover, Massachusetts: The Majority Press, 1986), pp. 23, 29, 32-33, 35-37

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Marcus Garvey, unlike his major rivals in the United States, built a mass organization that went beyond mere civil-rights agitation and protest and based itself upon a definite, well-thought-out program that he believed would lead to the total emancipation of the race from white dominion.

Central to the ideological basis underpinning Garvey's program was the question of race. For Garvey, the black man was universally oppressed on racial grounds, and any program of emancipation would have to be built around the question of race first. The race became a "political entity" which would have to be redeemed.³ Against the rival suggestion that humanity, and not the black race, should be the objects of his zeal, he argued that it was not "humanity" that was lynched, burned, jim-crowed and segregated, but black people.⁴ The primacy of race characterized the UNIA from its beginnings in Jamaica⁵ and by 1919 United States government officials were drawing attention to what they considered this subversive doctrine.⁶

Garvey went about the task of converting the disabilities of race into a positive tool of liberation with a thorough aggressiveness. "No man can convince me contrary to my belief," he declared, "because my belief is founded upon a hard and horrible experience, not a personal experience, but a racial experience. **The world has made being black a crime, and I have felt it in common with men who suffer like me, and instead of making it a crime I hope to make it a virtue.**"⁷

Accordingly, the consciousness of Garvey's followers was saturated with the new doctrine. Black dolls were manufactured for black children; Garvey's newspaper proclaimed itself the *Negro World*; he encouraged his followers to support their black businessmen and professionals; the race catechism used by his followers disabused the minds of black folk concerning the claims of the Hamitic myth by explaining that contrary to this myth, black people were "certainly not" the recipients of any biblical curse; he frowned upon

advertisements of a racially demeaning nature,⁸ the *Negro World* sponsored beauty contests and published photographs of beautiful black women, a subject on which Garvey waxed poetic—"Black queen of beauty, thou hast given color to the world."⁹ Indeed, practically every aspect of the organization was designed to bolster the black man's self-esteem and to foster pride in self.

The primacy of race in Garvey's thought was coupled with a deep pessimism concerning the future of the black man in America. He be-

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of advertisements for skin whiteners, often couched in the crudest possible language. Added to this, he discovered in New York, Boston, Washington and Detroit the Blue Vein Society and the Colonial Club. "The West Indian 'lights' formed the 'Colonial Club' and the American 'lights' the 'Blue Vein' Society."³⁰ These attitudes extended into the churches. It would appear then, that Garvey, as one of his supporters pointed out, did not "appeal" to intrarace color prejudice in the United States but rather "revealed" it.³¹

Despite the similarities, of course, the situation in America, where the majority did not need the support of the buffer mulatto element to the same extent as the white minority in the islands, was not as serious as in the West Indies. Garvey was fully aware of this. The situation in America was serious enough to warrant exposure and attack, but in the West Indies it more nearly approximated a rigid caste structure. Garvey himself pinpointed this difference better than any of his critics:

In the term "Negro" we include all those persons whom the American white man includes in this appellation of his contempt and hate. . . . The contents of the term are much reduced in Jamaica and the West Indies, but it carries no less of reprobation against the persons. . . .

The great curse of our Jamaica communal life is the failure of the hybrid population to realize their natural and correct identification. . . ,³²

So whereas the UNIA in the United States numbered among its ranks people of all colors, excluding whites, and business and professional people in addition to the great

mass of workers and peasants, in Jamaica it was largely confined to the "humbler sections" of humanity. This led Garvey to surmise that "God seems to save from the bottom upwards."³³

Garvey's experience with the light-skinned element, both in the West Indies and America, led him to be hostile toward those who seemed to portray the supercilious attitudes he abhorred. It led him, too, to consider miscegenation to be an evil which should not be perpetuated—"We are conscious of the fact that slavery brought upon us the curse of many colors within our Race, but that is no reason why we of ourselves should perpetuate the evil. ..."³⁴

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on 125 Street in Manhattan in 1920 is said to have tearfully exclaimed, "And to think, the Negroes will get their liberty before the Irish."⁴²

Garvey's race-first doctrine was essentially a stratagem to ensure self-reliance and equality for the downtrodden African race. Unlike the white preachers of this doctrine with whom he collaborated, he did not go a step further and preach racial superiority. He more than once stressed that "all beauty, virtue and goodness are the exclusive attributes of no one race. All humanity have their shortcomings; hence no statement of mine, at any time, must be interpreted as a wholesale praise of, or attack upon any race, people or creed."⁴³

Self-reliance was a necessary corollary to race first. In his earliest extant pamphlet Garvey explained, in terms showing the probable influence of Booker T. Washington, that "the Negro is ignored to-day simply because he has kept himself backward; but if he were to try to raise himself to a higher state in the civilized cosmos, all the other races would be glad to meet him on the plane of equality and comradeship." He went on to express an idea which would later cause him much enmity from Afro-American integrationists: "It is indeed unfair to demand equality when one of himself has done nothing to establish the right to equality."⁴⁴ Garvey never

abandoned this dual tendency to score the white race for its injustice while simultaneously utilizing the language of condemnation to spur the black race on to greater self-reliance.

Garvey's belief in the necessity for self-reliance led him occasionally to speak in the language of Social Darwinism. He attacked the pseudo-scientific racists who tried to justify genocide against black people in terms of the Darwinian "survival of the fittest" and turned their arguments to the cause of racial self-reliance. "White philosophers," he argued, "Darwin, Locke, Newton and the rest . . . forgot that the monkey would change to a man, his tail would drop off and he would demand his share."⁴⁵ And not only had these philosophers been mistaken, but black heroism in World War I had finally given the lie to such false assumptions. He reminded his black audiences that "that theory has been exploded in the world war. It was you, the superman, that brought back victory at the Marne."⁴⁶

The urgency Garvey felt for racial independence and self-reliance led him to argue that in independent endeavor lay the only hope of eventual solution to the problem of race prejudice. The white race would cease its

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aggressiveness toward the black when it was met by independent black power of a magnitude equal to its own.

White prejudice was manifested "not because there is a difference between us in religion or in colour, but because there is a difference between us in power."⁴⁷

Furthermore, Garvey believed that the black man had little choice in the matter. If he did not continue going forward, spurred on by his own efforts, then he would slide backward into slavery and even extermination. "The days of slavery are not gone forever," he reminded his followers. "Slavery is threatened for every race and nation that remains weak and refuses to organize its strength for its own protection."⁴⁸

The most important area for the exercise of independent effort was economic. Garvey believed, like Washington before him, that economics was primary. Successful political action could only be founded on an independent economic base. "After a people have established successfully a firm

industrial foundation," he wrote, "they naturally turn to politics and society, but not first to society and politics, because the two latter cannot exist without the former."⁴⁹

Within months of his arrival in the United States in 1916, Garvey was already appraising, with approval, the efforts Afro-Americans had made in the economic field. At this early period, before he had made his decision to remain in the United States, he wrote, in a vein having prophetic implications for his own career, "The acme of American Negro enterprise is not yet reached. You have still a far way to go. You want more stores, more banks, and bigger enterprises. I hope that your powerful Negro press and the conscientious element among your leaders will continue to inspire you to achieve. . . ."⁵⁰

This desire for economic self-reliance dominated Garvey's thought. The fact that the black man was a consumer and not an independent producer worried him. "Let Edison turn off his electric light and we are in darkness in Liberty Hall in two minutes," he once said, "The Negro is living on borrowed goods."⁵¹

Garvey made a valiant attempt to change this state of affairs. Between 1918 and the early 1920s Garvey's headquarters area in New York City sprouted a large assortment of UNIA businesses. The Black Star Line was incorporated in 1919. The Negro Factories Corporation followed not long afterward. Under its aegis there appeared Universal Laundries, a Universal Millinery Store, Universal Restaurants, Universal Grocery Stores, as well as a hotel, tailoring establishment, doll factory and print-[ing press(p.34)]

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Presiding over the Negro Factories Corporation, at that time employing about seventy-five people, was Ulysses S. Poston, UNIA minister of industries and a former editor of the black Detroit *Contender*.⁵⁴ Because of his position Poston found himself called upon to act as an unofficial adviser to Harlem businesses in general. During May 1922 alone, he reported, the UNIA Department of Labor and Industries had received

at least forty visits from Harlem businessmen who wanted the UNIA to bail them out.⁵⁵

In addition to the parent body in Harlem, local branches of the UNIA owned considerable amounts of property and sometimes launched into local business ventures. The encouragement of local businesses was in fact a prime motive for the enterprises established in Harlem by Garvey. These efforts were often successful. In 1927, for example, after several years of financial assault on the organization and two years after Garvey's incarceration, his attorneys stated that the organization still owned assets, usually real estate, valued at \$20,000 in Philadelphia, \$30,000 in Pittsburgh, \$50,000 in Detroit, and \$30,000 in Chicago, among other places." Local units outside the United States participated in such economic activity also. The Colon, Panama, UNIA, for example, ran a cooperative bakery, while the Kingston, Jamaica, branch ran a laundry and an African Communities League Peoples Co-operative Bank, the shares of which were open only to UNIA members.⁵⁷

The individual business enterprises established by UNIA branches all over the world were to be linked, according to Garvey's grand design, into a worldwide system of Pan-African economic cooperation. Such a trading community, when fully developed, would be so large that the economies of scale generated would enable it to thrive even in the face of hostility from the rest of the world. Garvey summed up this idea thus:

"Negro producers, Negro distributors, Negro consumers! The world of Negroes can be self-contained. We desire earnestly to deal with the rest of the world, but if the rest of the world desire not, we seek not."⁵⁸

The Black Star Line (and later the Black Cross Navigation and Trading Company) was to be the carrier for this Pan-African trade.

Garvey's attempts to establish economic self-reliance went beyond cooperative business enterprises, for UNIA branches acted as mutual aid friendly societies for the payment of death and other minor benefits to members. In rural areas among poor communities, this aspect of the organization's operations assumed greater importance. Local divisions

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also were required to maintain a charitable fund "for the purpose of assisting distressed members or needy individuals of the race," a fund for "loans of honor" to active members, and an employment bureau to assist members seeking work.⁵⁹ Economic self-reliance, especially on the American scene, acquired a special urgency for Garvey, for he foresaw a depression which he thought would finish the black man in America for good: "The readjustment of the world, as I have often said, is going to bring about an economic, industrial stagnation in America that is going to reduce the Negro to his last position in this nation."⁶⁰

The UNIA quest for self-reliance led to sporadic attempts at educational facilities provided by the organization. Garvey's correspondence with Booker T. Washington and his visit to the United States were both motivated by a desire to establish in Jamaica an industrial and agricultural school along the lines of Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. **This desire for an education geared toward independence continuously cropped up.** The 1920 Declaration of Rights had demanded unlimited and unprejudiced education for black people, and UNIA locals in Port Limon (Costa Rica), Colon (Panama), British Guiana and elsewhere ran elementary and sometimes grammar schools.⁶¹ One such school in Colon was described, two months after its inception in 1925, as being along cooperative lines (with free tuition for members' children), with an enrollment of more than three hundred and staffed by five British West Indian and one Panamanian teacher, the latter appointed to satisfy a government requirement for a Spanish-speaking teacher.⁶²

In New York City the association owned a **"Booker T. Washington University"** in the early years, and in 1926 the association in the United States obtained the **Smallwood-Corey Industrial Institute in Claremont, Virginia, afterward renamed Liberty University.** The school was reported to be on property adjoining the James River and containing the wharf where the second lot of slaves landed in Virginia in 1622. It was transferred to the UNIA in consideration for assuming its outstanding indebtedness. At the time of its transfer the school's vice-president, J. G. St. Clair Drake, was the UNIA's international organizer, while its principal, Caleb B. Robinson, was a member of the Philadelphia division.⁶³

Liberty University was acquired amid high hopes that it would become a successful vehicle for imparting self-reliance and race pride and for rehabilitating black history.⁶⁴ The university, like many other Afro-American colleges

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of the period, was in fact of high school standard, and it struggled on for three years before being closed in 1929 due to financial difficulty. Those students who did attend were often sponsored by local UNIA units and were dedicated Garveyites.

In addition to its formally organized schools, the UNIA throughout its history organized inservice training courses of various kinds. During Garvey's American period, for example, the organization carried out such programs for its civil servants, and ex-schoolmaster James O'Meally wrote a special guidebook for prospective UNIA officers. During Garvey's last years in London he organized a School of African Philosophy which, by means of correspondence courses as well as intensive courses administered by Garvey himself in Canada, prepared UNIA workers for their roles in the organization.

The insistent UNIA thrust for self-reliance can best be summarized in Garvey's own words:

The Universal Negro Improvement Association teaches to our race self-help and self-reliance, not only in one essential, but in all those things that contribute to human happiness and well being. The disposition of the many to depend upon the other races for a kindly and sympathetic consideration of their needs, without making the effort to do for themselves, has been the race's standing disgrace by which we have been judged and through which we have created the strongest prejudice against ourselves. . . .

The race needs workers at this time, not plagiarists, copyists and mere imitators; but men and women who are able to create, to originate and improve, and thus make an independent racial contribution to the world and civilization.⁶⁵

NOTES

1. *Negro World*, July 26, 1919.
2. *Ibid.*, January 5, 1924.
3. *Black Man 1* (September-October 1936): 5.
4. *Negro World*, July 28, 1923.

5. A UNIA application form of 1915 required the applicant to state his color. Enclosed in Marcus Garvey to Booker T. Washington, April 12, 1915, Box 939, Booker T. Washington Papers, Library of Congress.
