The Garvey Movement

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# The Garvey Movement

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346Garvey, himself, could not have planned a more strategic climax to his career in America than his imprisonment in Atlanta. The technical legal reason for his incarceration is obscured by the halo that shines about the head of the martyr. There is a sort of justice in this; for if the government were to punish all those who use the mails to defraud, it would round up those energetic business men who flood the mails with promises to give eternal youth and beauty to aging fat matrons, to make Carusos and Galli Curcis of members of church choirs, and to make master minds of morons. Garvey’s promises were modest in comparison. And, indeed, what does one ship, more or less, matter in an imaginary fleet of merchantmen?

There are aspects of the Garvey Movement that can not be treated in this cavalier fashion. It is those aspects we propose to set forth here. The writer recalls that when he was a child one could still hear Negroes express the hope that some Moses would appear among them and lead them to a promised land of freedom and equality. He has lived to see such hopes displaced by more prosaic and less fanciful efforts towards social betterment. When Booker Washington first appeared on the scene he was hailed as a Moses. This was chiefly an echo of the white man’s appraisal and soon died down when the Negro heard a message of patient industry, unsweetened by any prospect of a glorious future. What has distinguished the Garvey Movement is its appeal to the masses. While Negroes have found a degree of self-magnification in fraternal orders and the church, these organizations have not given the support to their ego-consciousness that whites find in the Kiwanis and especially the Klan. Garvey re-introduced the idea of a Moses, who was incarnate in himself, and with his masterly technic for dealing with crowds, he welded Negroes into a mass movement.

Before considering Garvey and his work, something should be said of the people he had to work with. The social status of the Negro in America should make them fertile soil for a mass movement to spring up in. They are repressed and shut out from all serious participation in American life. Not only does the Negro intellectual feel this repression, but the average Negro, like all mediocre people whose personalities must be supported by empty fictions, must find something to give meaning to his life and worth to his personality. One has simply to note how the superficial matter of color raises the most insignificant white man in the South to a place of paramount importance, in order to appreciate how much support a fiction gives to one’s personality. Yet American Negroes have been relatively free from mass movements. This fact should not be regarded as a further testimony to the Negro’s reputation for a policy of expediency in his present situation. There have been other factors to take the place of mass movements.

Many American Negroes have belittled the Garvey Movement on the ground that he is a West Indian and has attracted only the support of West Indians. But this very fact made it possible for him to contribute a new phase to the life of the American Negro. The West Indian Negroes have been ruled by a small white minority. In Jamaica, the Negro majority has often revolted and some recognition has been given to the mulattoes. This was responsible for Garvey’s attempt, when he first came to this country, to incite the blacks against those of mixed blood. He soon found that there was no such easily discernible social cleavage recognized by the whites in this country. Yet his attempt to draw such a line has not failed to leave its effect. The fact that the West Indian has not been dominated by a white majority is probably responsible for a more secular view of life. The Garvey Movement would find the same response among the Negroes of the South as among the West Indians were it not for the dominating position of the preacher, whose peculiar position is symtomatic of an otherworldly outlook among the masses. Even in the face of this situation foreign Negroes have successfully converted hard-shelled Baptists to the Movement in spite of the opposition of their ministers. This secular influence in the life of the Negro attains its true significance when viewed in relation to the part that preparation for death plays in the life of the black masses.

The Garvey Movement afforded an asylum, as all mass movements, for those who were dissatisfied with life for many reasons, which could in this case be attributed to their status as Negroes. Although most of his followers were ignorant, we find among them intellectuals who had not found the places in the world that their education entitled them to. Instead of blaming themselves,—and they were not always individually responsible—they took refuge in the belief that in an autonomous black Africa they would find their proper place. The black rabble that could not see its own poverty, ignorance, and weakness vented its hatred upon obscure “traitors” and “enemies,” who generally turned out to be Negro intellectuals who had achieved some distinction in American life. There is good reason to believe that Garvey constantly directed the animosity of his followers against the intellectuals because of his own lack of formal education.

We have noted how the Garvey Movement turned the Negro’s attention to this world. This was accomplished not only by promising the Negro a paradise in the future in Africa; but through the invention of social distinctions and honors, the Ne347gro was made somebody in his present environment. The humblest follower was one of the “Fellowmen of the Negro Race,” while the more distinguished supporters were “Knights” and “Sirs.” The women were organized into the Black Cross Nurses and the men into the Great African Army. “A uniformed member of a Negro lodge paled in significance beside a soldier of the Army of Africa. A Negro might be a porter during the day, taking his orders from white men, but he was an officer in the Black Army when it assembled at night in Liberty Hall. Many a Negro went about his work singing in his heart that he was a member of the great army marching to ‘heights of achievements’.”[1](#fn1) Yet these extravagant claims were based upon the deep but unexpressed conviction in the minds of most Negroes that the white man has set certain limits to their rise in this country.

In his half acknowledged antagonism towards Negro preachers and the soporific religion they served the masses, Garvey did not ignore its powerful influence. In fact he endeavored to fuse the religious experience of the Negro with his own program. The symbolism associated with Christmas was made the sign of the birth of a Negro nation among the nations of the earth; while Easter became the symbol of a resurrected race. Nor did he overlook the opportunity to make his position appear similar to that of Jesus. According to him, his own people, especially the recognized Negro leaders, had incited the American authorities against him just as the Jews had incited the Roman authorities against Jesus. In this connection the idea of gaining a lost paradise appears as it does in most mass movements. The “Redemption of Africa” became the battle cry. To his followers he trumpeted: “No one knows when the hour of Africa’s redemption cometh. It is in the wind. It is coming one day like a storm. It will be here. When that day comes, all Africa will stand together.”[2](#fn2)

The messianic element in this movement is not altogether lacking, although it does not stand out prominently. When Garvey entered the prison in Atlanta, besides commending his wife to the care of his followers, he spoke of the possibility of his death as only a messiah would speak. Under the caption, “If I Die In Atlanta,” he bade his followers:

Look for me in the whirlwind or the storm, look for me all around you, for, with God’s grace, I shall come and bring with me the countless millions of black slaves who have died in America and the West Indies and the millions in Africa to aid you in the fight for liberty, freedom and life.[3](#fn3)

By this promise Garvey raised himself above mortals and made himself the Redeemer of the Black World.

Many people are at a loss to understand how Garvey was able to attract supporters to a scheme which was manifestly infeasible and has been discredited by continued exposés of corruption and bickering within the organization. But such tests of reasonableness can not be applied to schemes that attract crowds. Crowds, it has been said, never learn by experience. The reason is clear, for the crowd satisfies its vanity and longings in the beliefs it cherishes. Not only because of their longing for something to give meaning to their lives, but because of the scepticism about them, Negroes do not find the satisfaction that their fathers found in the promise of heavenly abode to compensate for the woes of this world. They therefore offer a fine field for charlatans and fakirs of every description. This Movement has attracted many such men who give the black crowds the escape they are seeking. The work carried on by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which has been the subject of so many attacks by Garvey, has never attracted the crowd because it does not give the crowd an opportunity to show off in colors, parades, and self-glorification. The Association appeals to intelligent persons who are trying to attain tangible goals through cooperation. The same could be said of the Urban League. Dean Kelly Miller, it is said, once made the shrewd observation that the Negro pays for what he wants and begs for what he needs. This applies here as elsewhere. Those who support this Movement pay for it because it gives them what they want—the identification with something that makes them feel like somebody among white people who have said they were nobody.

Before concluding this brief interpretive sketch, we must add a few observations. Doubtless the World War with its shibboleths and stirrings of subject minorities offered a volume of suggestion that facilitated the Garvey Movement. Another factor that helped the Movement was the urbanization of the Negro that took place about the time. It is in the cities that mass movements are initiated. When the Negro lived in a rural environment he was not subject to mass suggestion except at the camp meeting and revival.

One of the most picturesque phases of the Movement has been the glorification of blackness which has been made an attribute of the celestial hierarchy. To most observers this last fact has been simply a source of merriment. But Garvey showed a knowledge of social psychology when he invoked a black god to guide the destiny of the Negro. The God of Israel served the same purpose. Those whites who said they would rather go to hell than to a heaven presided over by a black god, show what relation the average man’s god must bear to him. The intellectual can laugh, if he will; but let him not forget the pragmatic value of such a symbol among the type of people Garvey was dealing with.

The question is often asked, “Is Garvey sincere?” The same question might be asked of the McGee brothers of the Kentucky Revival and of evangelists in general. Although Garvey’s appeal has been more permanent, his methods have been348 in many respects those of the evangelist. Just because evangelists as a rule are well fed and free from material wants, it would be uncritical to put them all down as common swindlers. Likewise, with the evidence we have, we can not classify Garvey as such. He has failed to deal realistically with life as most so-called cranks, but he has initiated a mass movement among Negroes because it appealed to something that is in every crowd-minded man.

1. “Garvey: A Mass Leader”, *The Nation*, Vol. CXXIII, No. 3189 by the writer.[↩︎](#fnref1)

1. Ibid[↩︎](#fnref2)

1. *The Negro World,* February 14, 1925.[↩︎](#fnref3)