

Marcus Garvey and the reactionary logic of racialist politics

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2 March 2023

Dubbed the “Black Moses,” Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Jr. (1887-1940) is often favorably portrayed as an apostle of “race pride” and “racial uplift.” Parks, school buildings and even school curricula are still named in his honor. He created the popular black nationalist flag of red, black, and green, is believed to have coined the phrase “black is beautiful,” and collaborated in the formation of the nationalist African Orthodox Church.

Through it all, Garvey was ever the unprincipled opportunist and man on the make, whose moneymaking schemes led to his conviction on mail fraud charges and poisoned his reputation among black militants for a generation after his death.

While authors have typically addressed both Garvey’s race-pride politics and his back-to-Africa scheme involving the dubious Black Star Line (BLS) shipping company, they typically treat them separately, with the latter portrayed as an unfortunate digression from his politics. In fact, Garvey’s pursuit of wealth and power emerged directly from his politics. He is among the first substantial proponents of black capitalism. Like Booker T. Washington, whom he admired, Garvey praised capitalism and the development of a black bourgeoisie dedicated to its preservation.

It is this aspect of Garvey’s career that has won him the devotion of today’s black elite, including MacArthur “genius grant” award-winner Ta-Nehisi Coates, who recently praised Garvey as black nationalism’s “patron saint.”

Coates interviewed Garvey’s son, Dr. Julius Garvey, at Harlem’s Apollo Theater last August to mark Garvey’s 135th birthday.[1] Attempting to present Garvey as a “progressive” figure, Coates emphasized the role of the notorious anti-communist and long-time FBI director J. Edgar Hoover in targeting him. Less flattering aspects of Garvey’s career were passed over in silence, including his alliance with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and Jim Crow segregationists, his self-proclaimed attraction to fascism, and his anti-Semitism.

The Apollo event was part of a campaign for Garvey’s legal exoneration and eventual political rehabilitation. Julius Garvey claims to have 100,000 signatures demanding a pardon. Supporters include prominent Democrats, such as senators Cory Booker and Chris Murphy, and congresspersons James E. Clyburn, Yvette D. Clarke and Gregory W. Meeks. Clarke, along with former representative Charles B. Rangel and the late John Conyers, campaigned for decades for Garvey’s exoneration.[2]

Democrats have not been alone in such efforts. In 1983, arch-racist and strident segregationist Republican Sen. Jesse Helms joined the efforts for Garvey’s exoneration — for much the same motive. Offering an amendment to the Martin Luther King Holiday Bill, Helms said, “Marcus Garvey had a dream... It was the dream of black achievement, of black participation in the free enterprise system, and of black leadership throughout the world.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has subjected identity politics to a withering critique, demonstrating how it is used as a “left” fig leaf to cover up the abandonment of social reform, mounting social inequality,

and the turn to militarism and war. The Democratic Party and the many pseudo-left groups that orbit it use gender, sexuality, and in this case, race, in a bid to divide an increasingly militant and restive working class. Additionally, by lavishing money and positions on figureheads who promote identity politics, these forces encourage anti-democratic sentiments, undermine the fight for social equality and provide grist to the fascistic right.

Coates is a case in point. Long an advocate for race-based reparations, he has been lavished with money by various corporate foundations. More recently, he has been granted a tenured sinecure at Howard University alongside “1619 Project” creator Nikole Hannah-Jones, financed with \$20 million from the Knight Foundation, Ford Foundation and other major capitalist donors. They, among a coterie of upper-middle-class elements in the “diversity” industry, push the claim that anti-black racism is inherent in American society, and that all “white people,” past and present, are equally culpable for the historic crimes of American capitalism, including chattel slavery.

This reactionary and divisive perspective has among its ideological forerunners the outlook of Marcus Garvey.

Garvey, it must be said, is a far more complicated and contradictory figure than Coates or Hannah-Jones, whose black nationalism is largely reduced to demanding money from the American government. For a time, aspects of Garvey’s politics struck a chord with some of the most exploited black workers in America’s industrial cities and the impoverished nations of the Caribbean. This certainly distinguishes him from the contemporary milieu of “race experts,” whose audience is confined to the comfortable upper middle class.

Garvey preached not only racial separatism and black nationalism but also anti-colonialism and what would later be called Pan-Africanism. He could even posture as a radical. Adapting to the popularity of the Russian Revolution among black workers and intellectuals, Garvey publicly praised Lenin and Trotsky on several occasions. Responding to 1917 and the anti-colonial ferment that ensued, Garvey denounced American and European imperialism. Based on these eclectic politics of race pride and left rhetoric, his organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), became a mass organization. Its membership is reported to have reached somewhere between 500,000 and 3 million members at its peak in the 1920s.

Yet despite his radical aura, Garvey rejected socialism. Indeed, he steadfastly opposed the struggle for equality even among blacks. As time progressed, the left rhetoric receded and the right-wing essence of Garvey’s politics came to the fore. By the 1920s, he found himself in cooperation with Jim Crow politicians and the Ku Klux Klan, who agreed with black nationalism’s policy of racial separatism. By the end of his life, Garvey boasted he was a fascist.

The right-wing trajectory of his career has caused at least one historian to pose the question of whether or not Garvey actually was a fascist. In his book, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*,

British historian Paul Gilroy suggests that it was Garvey's "ideology of race consciousness" and extreme nationalism that "inclined him" in this direction.

Gilroy, also of Caribbean descent, poses a fundamental question: Can a history of oppression confer a claim on truth? This is the fraudulent historical claim of identity politics—that only blacks can speak on black history, or that truth should be judged by the "identity" of the speaker rather than the content of their analysis. In short, does race or other "identity" trump all measures of objective historical truth?

Gilroy warns against this outlook, emphasizing that, "if ultranationalism, fraternalism, and militarism can take hold, unidentified among the descendants of slaves, they can take hold anywhere. Past victimization affords no protection against the allure of automatic, pre-political uniformity." [3]

Gilroy's observation points to the dangers of relying on present concepts of identity to replace the hard work of studying history and understanding how the dynamic of class forces, operating within concrete historical development, produce race and other forms of identity. Race is not a substitute or co-equal for class, which defines historical epochs, and which emerges out of the material, social relations of production. To argue otherwise is to locate race outside of history, as, for example, the *New York Times* 1619 Project's abortive "reimagining" of American history has done.

Efforts to separate Garvey from the class structure of American history are equally doomed. As the late Judith Stein explained in her volume, *The World of Marcus Garvey, Race and Class in Modern Society*, whatever Garvey's mass appeal, his class ideology catered to those with upper-middle-class ambitions, not the masses of downtrodden black workers.

Stein correctly notes the appeal of black nationalism for the upper middle-class. "Nationalist solutions to the problems of race and racism were the product of class experiences and were best suited to the redress of elite ills," she observes, adding that, "entrepreneurial solutions to racial problems were irrelevant to black working-class life." [4]

The accommodationist origins of the UNIA

Garvey was born on August 17, 1887, in St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica, then a colony of the United Kingdom, to a moderately prosperous middle-class family. As a young printer's apprentice in Kingston, the island's capital and largest city, he was involved in an unsuccessful island-wide strike. According to his account, he became a leader of the workers. This portrayal is disputed by Stein, who cites one of the founders of the union, A.J. McGlashan, recalling that Garvey was involved in the strike, but denied he was a strike leader. Whatever his role, the strike undoubtedly exposed Garvey to the potential of the working class moving as a class—a potential that he came to oppose.

Garvey traveled more widely than the average Caribbean-born worker, living briefly in Costa Rica and Panama. In 1912, he journeyed to London, then visited Scotland, France, and Spain. While in London, Garvey worked on the newspaper of the Pan-Africanist journalist Duseé Mohamed Ali.

Returning to Jamaica in 1914, Garvey founded the UNIA. He modeled the organization on the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps accommodationist ideology of Booker T. Washington. The UNIA's preamble stated it was a "social, friendly, humanitarian, charitable, educational, institutional and constructive" organization devoted to uniting "black humanity." The organization pledged as its "general objects":

- To establish a Universal Confraternity among the race.
- To promote the spirit of race pride and love.
- To reclaim the fallen of the race.
- To administer to and assist the needy.
- To assist in civilizing the backward tribes of Africa.
- To strengthen the imperialism of independent African States.
- To establish Commissionaries or Agencies in the principal countries of the world for the protection of all Negroes, irrespective of nationality.
- To promote a conscientious Christian worship among the native tribes of Africa
- To establish Universities, Colleges and Secondary Schools for the further education and culture of the boys and girls of the race.
- To conduct a world-wide commercial and industrial intercourse.[5]

There was nothing "left" or radical in any of this. At this early point, Garvey offered not even a condemnation of British imperialism. In fact, the manifesto even suggested that the UNIA might establish a version of its own "imperialism of independent African states." The rhetoric about "civilizing the backward tribes" and the promotion of Christianity fit neatly into the colonizer's ideology of the "White Man's Burden" and could have been comfortably promulgated at the 1884 Berlin Conference which set off the imperialist scramble for Africa. And the program foretold Garvey's moneymaking schemes in the manifesto's call to promote "worldwide commercial intercourse."

Garvey did not see the colonial masses of the Caribbean and the oppressed blacks of the United States as the potential *agents* of historical change, but as the *objects* of his nationalist plans. He indeed blamed the oppressed masses for their impoverished cultural level.

"The bulk of our people are in darkness, and are really unfit for good society," Garvey stated. "To the cultured mind, the bulk of our people are contemptible — that is to say, they are entirely outside the pale of cultured appreciation." Garvey affirmed that the UNIA set "itself the task to go among the people and help them up to a better state of appreciation among the cultured classes and raise them to the standard of civilized approval. To do this we must get the co-operation and sympathy of our white brothers," i.e., capitalist ruling elite support.[6]

Mesmerized by Booker T. Washington's prestige and financial success, Garvey wrote to the American educator for funds to build a university modeled on his Tuskegee Institute. He also asked to visit Washington in the US, hoping to win donors among his patrons.

The fact that Garvey aligned himself with Washington in 1914 was highly significant, once again demonstrating his right-wing orientation. In 1895, Washington delivered his "Atlanta Compromise" speech which proved to be a critical defense of the Jim Crow race laws erected to divide the working class. Using the metaphor of the separate "five fingers" of the hand for "separate but equal," Washington endorsed racial segregation and rejected the fight for political rights among Southern blacks. It is not a coincidence that, only one year later, the US Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* provided the legal basis for the enactment of segregationist laws that would not be overturned for another 60 years.

Outraged by Washington's accommodation, historian, sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois and his co-thinkers formed the Niagara Movement in 1905 to demand equal treatment before the law, the protection of manhood suffrage and equal economic and political rights.

Garvey not only solidarized himself with the accommodationist Washington but groveled to the imperialists themselves, no matter their overt racism or brutality. In 1914, during World War I, the UNIA wrote to British King George V that the organization was "mindful of the great protecting and civilizing influence of the English nation... and their justice

to all men, especially their Negro subjects.” The letter went on to “beg to express our loyalty and devotion to His Majesty the King, and Empire... We sincerely pray for the success of British arms on the battlefields of Europe and Africa, and at Sea, in crushing the Common Foe.”[7]

At this time, Britain was brutally oppressing the masses in its vast colonial possessions in Africa, on the Indian subcontinent and in the Caribbean, including Garvey’s Jamaica. During the “Scramble for Africa” (1881-1914), the British government violently took control of over 30 percent of the African land mass, more than any other imperialist power. Britain’s vast colonies included Egypt, Nigeria, British East Africa (Kenya), Northern and Southern Rhodesia (Zambia and Zimbabwe), Bechuanaland (Botswana) and the Union of South Africa (South Africa). Despite it all, Garvey encouraged blacks to volunteer and give their lives in support of the “King and Empire,” praising the British Constitution as “free and liberal,” providing “justice to everyman within the state.” [sic]

By 1916, after two years of intense activity, the UNIA had only 100 members. Garvey blamed his problems on the hostility of the “colored gentry” who “failed to do their duty by the race in promoting civilized imperialism that would meet the approval of established ideas.”[8]

He set his sights on the US, staging a public relations campaign across the country to raise money. Creating introductory letters, Garvey called himself the “President-General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association” (it wasn’t unusual for him to inflate his credentials by fabricating himself as “Dr. Marcus Garvey”) and justified his customary charges for admission.

This nearly year-long tour encompassed the highly impoverished and segregated South. It left Garvey impressed not with the horrors of racism, but with the wealth and education of the black elite. After witnessing black-owned banks, real estate agencies, and theaters in Chicago and Atlanta, Garvey claimed that well-to-do American blacks had “revolutionized history in race development.” He shifted his aims from setting up schools to promoting black-owned businesses.

Returning to New York City in early 1917, Garvey began a plan to build the UNIA, beginning with locating its headquarters in Harlem, which was an epicenter for the city’s rapidly growing black population, driven by an influx of African Americans migrants from the south and immigrants from the Caribbean. Still, Garvey faced a difficult time recruiting people to his organization. At its founding, he had 18 members and considered returning to Jamaica. Hubert Harrison, a socialist intellectual from the Danish West Indies, urged him to stay.

Harrison, a prominent supporter of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), had recently left the Socialist Party, charging it with racism. He formed a new black group, the Liberty League, which quickly grew to over 2,000 people. Joining the group and characteristically adapting himself to its popularity, Garvey declared himself an opponent of the “white man’s war,” in reference to World War I, denounced the segregation of black soldiers in lodging and deplored the fact they were relegated to menial jobs.

In many ways Garvey sought to build the UNIA by distinguishing it from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909, as being more “black” and more “race conscious.” He emphasized the use of the term “Negro” in the name of his organization, as opposed to “colored,” the popular term of the period.

Garvey was actually importing to the US the racial-social stratification in the Caribbean Islands, socialist intellectual and historian CLR James noted. Garvey appealed to “Black Negroes against the Mulattos, whom he considered to be middle class.” James, himself Trinidadian, went on,

Thus, at one stroke he excluded the Negro middle class which was very largely of mixed blood. He deliberately aimed at the poorest, most downtrodden and humiliated Negroes.....His appeal

was to black against white. He wanted purity of race. A great part of his propaganda was based on past achievement of blacks, their present misery, their future greatness.[9]

During Garvey’s tour, the socialists in Harlem innovated a technique to reach a broader audience by placing a stepladder in a public square and arguing their views publicly. Harrison and A. Phillip Randolph were considered excellent street speakers. Both men welcomed Garvey and taught him their approach. Later, with Garvey’s association with the KKK, they would become bitter enemies.

War and revolution

US entry into the First World War blocked European immigration, just as millions of men were taken out of the workforce and put under arms. An acute labor shortage resulted. Industries began recruiting workers from the South, especially appealing to black workers looking to escape sharecropping and Jim Crow.

This demand for labor fueled a mass migration of southern tenant farmers and sharecroppers. The Great Migration, as it came to be known, was a seismic demographic shift in the US, as rural workers, black and white, joined the industrial working class. Historian James N. Gregory calculates that 2.7 million workers of all races left the South in the 1920s alone. In the 20th century as a whole, more than 7 million black workers and their families, about 20 million whites, and 1 million Latinos migrated north to cities like New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, St. Louis, and Milwaukee, and west, to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland.[10]

These migrants from the South entered a socially charged environment. The conditions caused by the war—inflation, labor shortage and the politicization of the working class—nurtured a strike wave. Beginning in 1916, more than 1 million workers struck each year through 1922, with 1919 the high-water mark, when over 4 million workers walked off the job. As was the longstanding custom, American employers attempted to pit races and immigrant groups against each other to weaken working class solidarity. Black workers were not infrequently used as strike breakers, as they were against the Great Steel Strike of 1919. This reactionary policy was abetted by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions which “protected” jobs with racial exclusionary clauses directed against black workers.[11]

Racial violence, even vicious racist pogroms, resulted. One of the worst of a series of riots erupted in July 1917 in East St. Louis, where 2,000 blacks were arriving weekly in search of work. Between 39 and 150 African Americans were murdered. Historian Elliott Rudwick’s account in *The Riot at East St. Louis* places much of the blame for the racial hatred on the St. Louis area newspapers, industrial employers and the Democratic Party, which whipped up racial hatred during the 1916 election.

The proximate cause of the riot, however, was the use of blacks as replacement workers at the city’s Aluminum Ore Company. Originally, there was little anti-black feeling in the plant, according to Rudwick. The union recognized the need to recruit black workers and had some success. In response, the company began a deliberate practice of replacing white workers with black workers.

“The company embarked upon a policy of increasing the Negro labor force in order to limit the future demands of white workers,” Rudwick notes. “During the months of December and January, when at least two hundred whites were discharged, nearly all of them members of the

Protective Association (union). The whites were being punished for union activities, and race tensions mounted after Negro replacements arrived.”[12] The year prior, 2,500 striking meatpackers in the area had also been replaced by black strikebreakers for similar reasons.

Garvey’s response was not to challenge the divide-and-conquer policies of the capitalist class but to blame all whites. While the NAACP held a Silent Parade in the aftermath of the East St. Louis riots as a protest to the government, and Harrison’s Liberty League called for self-defense, Garvey delivered a speech welcoming race war. “[T]he next war, the real war, would pit the white race against the darker races,” he prophesied. “The East St. Louis riot was not a local or American incident but the first shot in the worldwide racial struggle... For every Negro lynched by whites in the South, Negroes should lynch a white in the North.”[13]

Yet Garvey’s prescription of racial conflict and separatism was countered by an epoch-making revolution in far-away Russia, itself a by-product of the imperialist war. The American strike wave was in fact part of a global upsurge of the working class whose crowning achievement was the Russian Revolution in October 1917 led by the Bolsheviks and its two great leaders, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. The defeat of the hated czar and the establishment of the first workers state electrified the American and international working class. John Reed’s account of the revolution, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, was so popular it was reprinted four times the first year it was published.

In the darkest days of the race riots and lynching, the Russian Revolution had a profound impact on black artists, intellectuals, and militant workers. Writing in 1921, the poet Claude McKay captured one aspect of its influence:

For the American Negroes the indisputable and outstanding fact of the Russian Revolution is that a mere handful of Jews, much less in ratio of the number of Negroes in the American population, have attained, through the Revolution, all the political and social rights that were denied to them under the regime of the Czar...[T]he Negro in politics in social life is ostracized only technically by the distinction of color; in reality the Negro is discriminated against because he is of the lowest type of worker. [14]

Expressions of ruling class fear also testify to the influence of the Russian example on black workers. Before the war, President Woodrow Wilson believed blacks in America were his most important patriots. But he changed his assessment by the end of the war. Noting the growing rebellions of black troops returning from Europe, Wilson, who had earlier used black troops to protect the White House, now feared returning black soldiers would become “the greatest medium in conveying Bolshevism to America.” Some 400,000 had served in his “war for democracy,” and had come home “looking for a little democratic payoff for themselves, but couldn’t find much anywhere,” as James P. Cannon, leader of the Socialist Workers Party, put it.[15]

At the time it seemed that every leading black intellectual in Harlem was identified with socialism.

Caribbean-born Harrison, the leading black organizer in the Socialist Party of America (SPA), lectured and organized support for Eugene Deb’s 1912 presidential campaign, and founded the Colored Socialist Club to support the party. A. Philip Randolph, an SPA leader and later founder and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union, aligned with Chandler Owen, another black intellectual, to establish the widely read socialist newspaper *The Messenger*. (Owen was occasionally referred to as the “black Lenin,” and Randolph as the “black Trotsky.”) Other prominent black socialists included Wilfred Domingo, a Jamaican-born socialist and the first editor of Garvey’s newspaper, *Negro World*,

and McKay, the well-known writer and gifted poet who communicated with Trotsky and became a delegate to the 4th Congress of the Communist International in 1922.

Garvey adapted himself to the popularity of the Russian Revolution. In March 1919, he publicly praised Lenin. “The Russian people have issued a proclamation of sympathy and good will towards the laboring peoples of the world,” he stated following the First Congress of the Communist International’s proclamation against colonialism in Africa and Asia.[16] Garvey declared that the “‘nightmare of Bolshevism’ will torment the imperialists” and will spread “until it finds a haven in the breast of all oppressed peoples.” Upon Lenin’s death in 1924, Garvey sent a cablegram to the Moscow government expressing “the deep sorrow and condolence of the four hundred million Negroes of the world” toward the “irreparable loss of the Russian people.” Garvey then declared Lenin to be “one of the world’s greatest benefactors. Long life to the Soviet Government of Russia.”

Some historians have drawn from these remarks the conclusion that Garvey was an ardent supporter of the Russian Revolution and that his opposition to socialism was merely American-based.[17] The record shows that Garvey’s rejection of the fight for socialism in the US was no exception. He briefly adapted his racial politics to the widespread support for the revolution among blacks, but consistently opposed its revolutionary aims.

McKay had earlier written a letter to Garvey’s *Negro World* pointing to the implications of the Russian Revolution for the United States. In words aimed at Garvey, McKay wrote:

Every Negro who lays claim to leadership should make a study of Bolshevism and explain its meaning to the colored masses. It is the greatest and most scientific idea afloat in the world today that can be easily put into practice by the proletariat to better its material and spiritual life. Bolshevism . . . has made Russia safe for the Jew. It has liberated the Slav peasant from priest and bureaucrat who can no longer egg him on to murder Jews to bolster up their rotten institutions. It might make these United States safe for the Negro.

Garvey made no such study. Instead, while he offered rhetorical praise to Lenin and Trotsky, Garvey escalated his nationalist language and began reprinting his own speeches to build a name for himself. His organization began to grow. He took over Harrison’s Liberty League and used it as a base to build support in Harlem and elsewhere. Yet, even with Harrison’s group, UNIA’s membership consisted largely of West Indian immigrants who moved to the US in sizeable numbers after the turn of the century.[18]

Garvey and the “Black Star Line” Ponzi scheme

Garvey expanded his organization not by appeals to black workers, but by developing business interests dedicated to their exploitation, and by winning the allegiance of prominent black ministers in a number of cities.

The Universal Housing Corporation (UHC), set up by the Philadelphia UNIA, became a landlording firm preying on the terrible conditions of black workers. The UHC bought buildings, ousted the white tenants, and then raised rates on their new black renters. They were met with protests over rent profiteering. Then there was the Garveyite Negro Factories Corporation—comprised of bakeries, laundries, a cooperative bank, groceries and restaurants. The purported aim was a separate all-black economy.

Through the blessings of the popular pastors, Garvey was able to hold large meetings in Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles and Oakland, California. In return, he bestowed various terms of

aggrandizement upon these ministers. Many titles were exalted, with monikers plundered from the lingo of the Free Masons, such as High Chancellor, Chaplain General, Potentate, and Supreme Commissioner. Around the same time, he established a new newspaper, *Negro World*, that propagandized his message in the US and the Caribbean. And by July 1919, he had established new headquarters in Harlem.

Garvey's right-wing politics were never far removed from his money-making schemes. Much like his allies in the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, which rose meteorically and collapsed amidst a subscription-selling Ponzi scheme, Garvey's visions of an African Empire with himself at the head were waylaid by his own hucksterism centered around the "back to Africa" steamship company, the Black Star Line.

Garvey announced the creation of the company in 1919. He sold it politically by encouraging his followers to "participate in a great struggle for emancipation" not by a movement against racial division and brutal violence, but by purchasing shares in his company. Garvey said that his ships, all run by African Americans, would become a great commercial success. They would also ferry blacks back to Africa, he said.

According to Du Bois, the initial reaction among blacks was skepticism. However, when people witnessed the boat in full "commission with a black crew and a black captain," and heard that "this would be the first of a fleet of vessels transporting blacks between the US, West Indies, and Africa, the popularity and reputation of Mr. Garvey and his association increased quickly." [19] Du Bois concluded that thousands of people believed in him as a "sort of religion." Garvey, Du Bois said, "allows and encourages all sorts of personal adulation, even printing in his paper the addresses of some of the delegates who hailed him as 'His Majesty.'" [20]

While previously Garvey had promoted black business and economic independence as a great leveler, he now romanticized a new "homeland" in Africa.

As Stein explains in her book on Garvey, the back-to-Africa movement was an expression of Pan-Africanism. It was as much, if not more, about commercial success connected to "the elite tradition of ambition and uplift," than to actual return to the "Mother country." After the turn of the century, a boom in African commodities sparked increased commerce with the US. Garvey believed his company, as a "black shipping company," could get its share of the resulting wealth.

Garvey approached the African continent with classic imperialist thinking. "If the native Africans are unable to appreciate the value of their own country from the standard of Western civilization," he said, "then it is for us, their brothers, to take them the knowledge of information that they need to help develop the country for the common good." [21] In an attempt to clarify the aims of the shipping company, UNIA Vice President William Sherrill told his members, the "UNIA is not a 'Back to Africa' movement, it is a movement to redeem Africa."

By the end of 1919, Garvey, now holding a messianic view of himself, boasted that the UNIA had 2 million members. In the summer of 1920, the UNIA held a week-long international conference reportedly attended by 25,000 delegates from 25 countries. There Garvey was crowned by the convention delegates with the exalted title of "provisional president of Africa." [22]

But the entire operation was built on pillars of sand. According to one historian:

Garvey set in motion a speculative 'scheme' that functioned only in a purely fictional, impossible time of perpetual prospect, a present characterized by infinite progress but also by perpetually deferred completion. Any attempt to bring it to a measurable conclusion would bring the whole system into collapse. And collapse it did, in spectacular fashion. Like a Ponzi scheme—albeit with a far different set of intentions and repercussions—Garvey's

Black Star Line venture could not sustain itself in real time. [23]

CLR James aptly described the Black Star Line as "two leaky ships that made one or two streaky voyages." [24] Du Bois began his own investigation, finding that the UNIA engaged in a form of kiting. All the organization's income was placed into a pool, and money was moved around from profitable to failing enterprises, including the ships, to keep things going. A long list of people began suing the UNIA for lack of payment, including the crew of his Black Star Line vessel, the *Kanawha*.

Records of stock sales were incomplete and poorly kept. Garvey's accountants were alarmed, reporting indiscretions to the District Attorney of New York City. Garvey was called in for questioning six times in as many weeks.

The Bureau of Investigation (BOI), the forerunner of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which had earlier investigated Garvey for his incendiary speeches, now placed him on a deportation list with other Palmer Raid victims. The case was dropped, however, for lack of evidence.

Subsequent hearings by the anti-communist New York state senator Clayton Lusk charged the *Negro World* with fomenting socialist revolution among blacks. In response, Garvey removed the offending essay's author, his childhood friend Wilfred Domingo, and thereby distanced himself from the UNIA's most prominent socialist.

In spite of the UNIA's opposition to class struggle and promotion of capitalism, Hoover, a virulent racist, believed Garvey was the most dangerous black man in America. In January 1922, the BOI arrested Garvey, charging him with mail fraud in the selling of shares for the Black Star Line. Garvey suspended all activities of the company. One ship, the *Yarmouth*, was sold for scrap, while the crew of the *Kanawha* was left stranded in Cuba.

Garvey's mail fraud trial in June 1923 exposed the shoddy character of the organization's financial records and its sordid inner workings. Despite Garvey's denials, it became clear that nothing took place without Garvey's approval and that the organization was engaged in kiting, covering over bad debts with new money.

In his attempt to find any means to destroy Garvey, Hoover called agents he sent into the organization to testify against him. The UNIA leader, supremely confident in his ability to persuade the jury, undermined his defense by firing his legal counsel. At the conclusion of the trial Garvey's three co-defendants were acquitted, but Garvey was convicted.

Garvey was sentenced to five years in prison and a \$1,000 fine. While awaiting imprisonment Garvey continued to pursue his back-to-Africa scheme. In 1924, the Liberian government exited a deal with Garvey to create an "American Negro settlement." Instead, Liberia opted to sign on with Firestone Rubber Company, which wanted no part of Garvey or his supporters. When Garvey's representatives arrived at the port of Monrovia they were arrested and sent back to New York, ending his romanticized vision of a unified continental Africa under his control.

Had Garvey come to power in Africa, his right-wing capitalist policies would have been viciously hostile to the continent's oppressed masses. He would have behaved similarly to the brutal Americo-Liberian elite, descendants of a much earlier "back to Africa" scheme, who oppressed native Africans, denied them the right to vote, and in some cases reduced the native population to slavery. [25]

Garvey embraces the Ku Klux Klan

The UNIA's growth in the 1920s came in the context of the defeat of

revolutionary upheavals in Europe, the ending of the 1916-1922 strike wave in the US, and a temporary stabilization of global capitalism. This same reactionary climate nurtured the reemergence of the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan. As it turned out, the two organizations—the UNIA and the KKK—were not only parallel. They actively assisted each other.

Indeed, by the early 1920s, Garvey was pronouncing himself not only an opponent of social and political integration for blacks, but an ardent supporter of Jim Crow itself. This was on display in 1921 when Garvey took another tour of the American South. It was during this period that he made the extraordinary decision to meet with the KKK and conclude an alliance.

In Raleigh, North Carolina, Garvey praised the white South for having “lynched race pride into the Negroes.” In New Orleans, Garvey said, “This is a white man’s country, he found it, he conquered it and we don’t blame him if he wants to keep it. I’m not vexed with the white man of the South for Jim Crowing me because I am black. I never built any streetcars or railroads. The white man built them for their own convenience. And if I don’t want to ride in them, I’d better walk.”[26]

Edward Clarke, the second-in-command of the KKK, was so impressed after reading one of Garvey’s speeches praising Jim Crow that he requested a face-to-face meeting with the “remarkable” leader. On June 25, 1922, Garvey held a two-hour meeting with Clarke in the KKK’s Atlanta offices. Garvey’s notes on the meeting reveal how the demagogue portrayed the policy of compliance and conformity as a policy of triumph:

Have this day interviewed Edward Young Clarke, acting Imperial Wizard Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. In conference of two hours he outlined the aims and objects of the Klan. He denied any hostility towards the Negro Improvement Association. He believes America to be a white man’s country, and also states that the Negro should have a country of his own in Africa. He denied that his organization, since its reorganization, ever officially attacked the Negro. He has been invited to speak at forthcoming convention to further assure the race of the stand of the Klan.[27]

These encounters occurred as African Americans were lynched by the dozens, often in brutal, horrendously inhuman public spectacles.

By the time Garvey visited Clarke’s office, the reconstituted Klan had grown to 3 million members, with its politics focused heavily on violent opposition to socialism and the promotion of what it called “100% Americanism.” The Klan, in this, its second iteration, was as much opposed to radicalized workers and immigrants as it was to blacks. Showing off the support within the US ruling circles for this fascist ideology, the KKK held a march in 1925 of 50,000 members down Pennsylvania Avenue, in Washington DC.[28]

The encounter between Garvey and Clarke revealed the basis of their mutual pact. It was Garvey’s support for racial separation and his rejection of the struggle for equality that ingratiated him with the KKK. Klan members even began to attend UNIA meetings. Garvey called the Klan and other white supremacist groups “better friends” of his race, citing their “honesty and fair play.” He concluded, “You may call me a Klansman if you will...”

The meeting with Clarke and the KKK generated a wave of revulsion in black communities across the US. Virtually every African American newspaper denounced Garvey’s alliance with the Klan. Most of these papers had devoted years of their energies to exposing the dangers of the Klan.

Prominent black leaders, including Du Bois, Randolph, Owens, and others, responded with a “Garvey must go” campaign.[30] Du Bois

famously called Garvey “the most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in America and in the world.”[31] While opposition to Garvey was justified, the “Garvey must go” demand resorted to unprincipled tactics, with Du Bois and Randolph appealing to nativist sentiments calling for Garvey’s deportation to Jamaica.

Divisions also emerged within the UNIA. Rev. J. W. H. Eason, a prominent black clergyman from Philadelphia who had attracted hundreds if not thousands to the group, denounced Garvey publicly. Eason charged Garvey with “incompetence, forming an alliance with a discreditable organization and creating an unfriendly feeling among American Negroes.”[32] In opposing Garvey’s betrayal, Eason pointed to the sign in UNIA’s headquarters, Liberty Hall, that said, “The New Negro is Ready for the Ku Klux Klan.”[33] Garvey retaliated by placing Eason before an internal show trial and expelling him from the organization.

In 1922, Garvey’s *Negro World* became the only black newspaper in support of a colonization resolution by the Mississippi legislature to relocate all blacks in the state to Africa. Garvey’s newspaper headline shouted, “Hurrah for Senator McCallum. Work of the universal Negro Improvement Assn. Bearing Fruit.” The bill, promoted by arch-racist Senator Torrey George McCallum, was defeated in the state house on the basis of its impracticality.

In 1924, Garvey began a close relationship with Jim Crow segregationist Earnest Cox, the author of *White America*, a volume that argued that race-mixing would mark the end of “White civilization.” To solve the “problem” of miscegenation his book proposed to remove all people of African descent from the US. The pair became close collaborators, with Garvey endorsing *White America* and demanding his members become its biggest promoters. UNIA adherents sold an astonishing 17,000 copies of the book in Detroit alone, endearing Garvey to Cox.[34]

Cox and another eugenicist, John Powell, defended Garvey during his imprisonment for mail fraud and campaigned for his release.[35] Cox worked with US Senator Theodore Bilbo from Mississippi—one of the most disreputable names in the obscene history of racism and segregation in America, and a known and proud member of the KKK—to write the 1939 Greater Liberia Act. If the bill had been enacted, it would have meant the forcible deportation of 12 million blacks to Liberia. Bilbo claimed it would relieve unemployment. The bill did not pass, but it was supported by Garvey.[36]

Garvey later said of Bilbo and Cox, “These two white men have done wonderfully well for the Negro and should not be forgotten.” In return, Cox dedicated his racist screed, *Let My People Go*, to Garvey, defining their association as one based on a “spiritual understanding.”[37]

On October 28, 1925, Garvey welcomed Powell, an open white supremacist and founder of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America, to an event in Harlem. Powell, exclaimed Garvey, had his “greatest respect” for his “honesty and lack of hypocrisy.” Garvey went on in his praise:

In our desire to achieve greatness as a race, we are liberal enough to extend to others a similar right.... All races should be pure in minds and in outlook, for that we, as Negroes, admire the leaders and members of the Anglo-Saxon clubs. They are honest and honorable in their desire to purify and preserve the white race even as we are determined to purify and standardize our race.[38]

The KKK reached out on several occasions to Garvey’s movement to broker violence against those they considered mutual opponents. In 1922, the KKK sent a severed hand to A. Phillip Randolph with a threatening letter attempting to silence his criticism of Garvey, “If you are not in favor with your own race movement, you can’t be with ours. There is no space in our race for you and your crowd. We have sent you a sample of our

good work, so watch your step or else...”[39]

It is notable that during this life, Garvey repudiated all ties with socialists, labor militants including A. Philip Randolph and NAACP liberals, but not with the KKK or white supremacists.

Garvey embraces fascism

Garvey’s cooperation with the Ku Klux Klan was not a one-off event. His racial perspective attracted him to extreme nationalism, racist theories and the “will to power” ideology of Mussolini and Hitler.

Three years before his death, in 1937, Garvey confessed his admiration for fascism. “We were the first Fascists,” avowed Garvey. “We had disciplined men, women, and children training for the liberation of Africa. The black masses saw that in this extreme nationalism lay their only hope and readily supported it. Mussolini copied fascism from me...”[40]

CLR James agreed with Garvey’s self-assessment. “All the things Hitler was to do so well later; Marcus Garvey was doing in 1920 and 1921,” James wrote. Referring to Garvey’s African Legion, James said, “He organized stormtroopers, who marched, uniformed, in his parades, and kept order and gave color to his meetings.”[41]

Whether or not Garvey was actually a fascist is of secondary importance. Unlike those of Mussolini and Hitler, Garvey’s movement never even remotely posed the threat of realizing state power. Nonetheless, Garvey’s attraction to fascism is significant, as are similarities of his underlying ideology. What Trotsky said of Hitler’s thought could just as well be said of Garvey’s: It was characterized by “sentimental formlessness, absence of disciplined thought, ignorance along with gaudy erudition,” the purpose of which was to fan genuine grievances into a racist worldview.

Garvey shared with fascism a vicious anti-Semitism. This was on open display after his trial for mail fraud. He disparaged the judge and the district attorney as “damned dirty Jews” telling the press, “When they wanted to get me, they had a Jewish judge try me, and a Jewish prosecutor. I would have been freed but two Jews on the jury held out against me ten hours and succeeded in convicting me, whereupon the Jewish judge gave me the maximum penalty.”[42]

Similar to the fascist squads of Italy and Germany, the UNIA was known for the use of violence against perceived opponents inside and outside the organization. In October 1919, Garvey formed the African Legion following the assassination attempt on his life. The paramilitary organization consisted of men and women with a special division that provided intelligence on its membership. Often dressed in military garb, the group was also known for its intimidation of members and outsiders.

In February 1923, UNIA members attacked socialist Chandler Owen in Pittsburgh. According to a *Washington Post* account, Garvey supporters “rushed a streetcar in which Chandler Owen....was riding and failed to harm him only through the timely intervention of the police.”[43] A month earlier the “silver-tongued” Rev. Eason was murdered as he left a church meeting in New Orleans by a member of Garvey’s security team. Eason, listed as one of the chief witnesses for the prosecution against Garvey in his mail fraud trial, was killed as he was winning support within the organization against Garvey.

The race rhetoric and the violent tactics were the outcomes of an essentially fascist program. Summarizing his father’s worldview, Marcus Garvey, Jr. was unabashed in associating with Hitlerian thought. “African National Socialism postulates that the children of the Black God of Africa have a date with destiny,” he said. “We shall recreate the glories of ancient Egypt, Ethiopia, and Nubia ... It seems certain that the world will one day be faced with the black cry for an African ‘Anschluss’ and

the ... demand for African ‘Lebensraum.’”[44]

Garvey’s black nationalism, including its thuggish and fascist elements, was recast for the next generation by the Nation of Islam (NOI), founded on appeals to racism, anti-Semitism and black capitalism. Longtime NOI head Elijah Muhammad was a member of the UNIA in Detroit in the 1920s.[45] The parents of Malcolm X—the NOI’s most prominent minister before he broke with the organization in 1964—had been local leaders of the UNIA chapter in Omaha, Nebraska. Many of Garvey’s followers joined the NOI after the UNIA disintegrated in the 1930s.

The NOI denounced “whites” as “devils,” but followed Garvey in making alliances with white supremacists. Malcolm X was himself the source of this revelation. “I know for a fact that there is a conspiracy between the Muslims and the Lincoln Rockwell Nazis, and also the Ku Klux Klan,” he said. “There is a conspiracy.”[46]

Malcolm X’s biographer, Manning Marable, also cites “an agreement of mutual assistance” between the NOI and the American Nazi Party. In January 1961, NOI leader Elijah Muhammad instructed Malcolm X to meet with the KKK to inquire about the possible purchase of land in Georgia or South Carolina. Malcolm X said, “They [the KKK] wanted to make this land available to him [Muhammad] so that his program of separation would sound more feasible to Negroes.” Malcolm X exposed the meetings only days before he was assassinated by the NOI. Malcolm X also exposed that the KKK had requested assistance from the NOI in locating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr in their efforts to assassinate him.[47] Malcolm X refused to collaborate in this conspiracy.

The inescapable logic of Garvey’s racist views

Garvey’s conviction for mail fraud was handed down in June 1923. He was imprisoned in Atlanta in 1925. After a petition campaign by his supporters, President Calvin Coolidge commuted Garvey’s sentence under the stipulation he be deported to Jamaica immediately after his release on November 18, 1927. On his native island, Garvey attempted to revive the UNIA, without success. He moved to London in 1935, and died there on June 10, 1940, isolated and obscure. In a cruel twist, earlier that year the *Chicago Defender* had prematurely reported his death.

The tie that binds Garvey’s entire career is rejection of the class struggle. As a younger man, he penned tributes to the imperialists of Great Britain, the gendarme of social oppression in Jamaica. This was followed by craven appeals to American capitalists following in the right-wing accommodationist footsteps of Booker T. Washington. While briefly attempting to exploit the influence of the Russian Revolution among black workers, Garvey soon enough parlayed his racist demagoguery into fame and abortive business ventures. Garvey ended his life in alliance with eugenicists and the KKK, and as a sympathizer of Hitler and Mussolini.

Garvey was a demagogue and a charlatan who preyed on despair and hopelessness. He told blacks that racism was endemic to American society, and the only salvation was separation. But the horrifying racial violence of the period was only one side of the equation. The other side was the class struggle and the international growth of socialism, whose high point was the Russian Revolution. The success of the first workers’ state galvanized a layer of the most class-conscious blacks, many of them Garvey’s friends and associates. But Garvey quickly and thoroughly distanced himself from this association.

Garvey, instead, provided a pro-capitalist, race-based channel for the anger of black workers and, tragically, hindered the necessary political struggle to unite the working class across the color line. As historian C.

Vann Woodward summarized the issue, “For black workers to define their problem primarily in terms of race was to ally themselves with white capitalists against white workers. That was the strategy of Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey.” Or, as CLR James aptly put it, Garvey “used fierce words, but was opposed to the labor movement and counseled subservience to the bosses.”

Garvey’s “back to Africa” movement was as fantastical as it was reactionary. It had no prospect of success. Much more probable was something equally close to Garvey’s heart—to make a capitalist out of himself and a wealthy black bourgeoisie out of those he sought to represent.

In this critical sense, while Garvey is gone, the right-wing elements of Garveyism remain: Its overriding aim is to racially divide the working class and, in the process, to make a business of it. Money and wealth are the “final home of black nationalism,” as the WSWS noted in a recent review of the 1619 Project documentary series. It is all that remains of Garvey’s separatism “after the long, pitiless process of historical distillation.”

These elements of Garvey’s thought survive in the writings of race and money-obsessed celebrities such as Coates and Hannah-Jones. What has changed is that these ideological remnants of black nationalism now form a central part of the politics of the American ruling class and the Democratic Party, which in Garvey’s time leaned on Jim Crow white supremacy. Today’s racialsists promote an ideology that is in complete service to American capitalism—under conditions of an escalating class struggle internationally and the threat of World War III.

Workers must draw a warning from the life and trajectory of Marcus Garvey. His life proves, once again, that any outlook based on “race and blood” is without the slightest progressive element. The unification of the working class across all divisions: racial, religious, national or any other “identity,” is an urgent necessity. It is the prerequisite for the destruction of capitalism and all of its attendant ills—war, poverty, disease, hunger, oppression and racism included.

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