

Contributions of marcus garvey and malcolm x history essay



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It has been widely acclaimed that slavery has been one of the cruellest practices in American history and when it was abolished and blacks had been emancipated, they had expected to have the same aspirations of fellow whites of “ life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. However, segregation and especially the Jim Crow laws that followed countered their expectations. As decades passed by, many blacks organised themselves into groups to gain themselves their freedom that was promised to them by President Lincoln. There were two main strands that black groups went: the integrationist movement which followed peaceful methods and protests under the leadership of individuals such as Brooker T. Washington and Martin Luther King but also the separatist movement which condoned violence in reaction to white violence and was led by individuals such as Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X. The latter also favoured Black Nationalism as they wanted a separate nation either within the USA or in Africa. This essay will look at the separatist viewpoint and assess the significance of two main leaders Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X.

In many ways the separatist movement started to gain momentum with the arrival of Marcus Garvey. Garvey who was born in Jamaica in 1887, founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1914 and immigrated to America in 1916. Garvey believed that Africa was the spiritual home of all blacks and promoted a Pan-African philosophy. He argued for blacks to return to their “ fatherland” Africa and this was at the centre of the UNIA’s appeal but one can question whether the UNIA saw this as a realistic solution. However, he repeatedly stated the need in uniting all blacks into “ one grand racial hierarchy” and sought economic, social and political

freedom for blacks by building a community exclusively for them. He saw the need for closer ties with an independent Africa as he believed that this would result in African-Americans having the same international protection and respect as other immigrants such as Italians.

While Garvey clearly failed in uniting all blacks let alone in America, Professor C. Eric Lincoln credits Garvey's success in Harlem by stating that he was the only black who "has successfully mobilised the masses of America's most populous.... black ghetto".[1] While clearly advocating black separatism, Garvey retained credibility by stating the need for Black equality and not superiority and also stating that he held no resentment towards whites. There is an argument that UNIA members were more flexible than the majority of the white community who favoured some form of white superiority. Racial equality has remained central to the civil rights cause and was even espoused by Malcolm X particularly during the latter years of his life. Garvey carried out his philosophy through publishing. He set up the Negro World Publications in 1918 which quickly gained a circulation in excess of 200, 000 readers.[2] This was the peak of Garvey's influence.

Today Garvey is strongly associated with Black Nationalism. Although Garvey did not invent Black Nationalism within America, he was the first African American to create a mass movement. There is debate about how many members was part of the UNIA ranging from 80, 000 to Garvey's fantasy claim of 8 million members[3]. However, there is little doubt that Garvey influenced millions of Blacks. Garvey gave Black Americans identity and also hope by claiming that they had proud past and will have a strong future.

One of the strengths of the UNIA was that it was largely run by working class members. However, the UNIA was more credible and respectable than other urban black groups as they also attracted a number of successful professionals such as businessman, lawyers, politicians and ministers. A number of women also had high profile roles such as Garvey's first wife Amy Ashwood who helped found the UNIA and Charlotta Bass who headed the UNIA in California. These strengths of the UNIA contrasted heavily with the NAACP which was mostly run by middle to upper class mixed or black intellectuals. The inclusionary form of the UNIA made it one of the few Black groups striving for equality that was made up of working class as well as female members. Thus, the UNIA gave a large number of blacks an opportunity to participate in the fight for equality. Furthermore unlike the NAACP who gained large funds from white abolitionists, and was entirely financed by black people. These features enabled the UNIA to be far more successful than the NAACP in garnering racial pride. Garvey was also critical of other black leaders such as Booker T Washington who he accused of supporting whites. These features all contributed to the UNIA being the most powerful black rights group.

Garvey's ambitious plans for racial equality ultimately failed and the significance of Garvey dramatically decreased by 1922. The Black Star Line was bankrupt and the collapse of Garvey's flagship programme damaged his status and credibility; the movement of blacks "back home" to Liberia had clearly failed and Garvey had been charged for fraud. Garvey's tone became more radical and controversial as he fought deportation. He wanted complete segregation of races. One can question whether Garvey changed

his stance to become more accommodating to racist whites and thus improve his chances to remain in America. Garvey's call for complete segregation fitted in with the stance of white supremacist groups such as the White American Society and the Anglo-Saxon Club. Whatever his reasons for this move, his stance was largely opposed by blacks. There was widespread agreement that Garvey's program of separatism undermined efforts for black equality. It was during this time that Garvey bizarrely held talks with chief Klansman Edward Clarke.

CRITICS

However, Garvey had a number of critics during his lifetime with the most prominent being the NAACP founder W. E. B. Du Bois who labelled Garvey as "the most dangerous" enemy towards blacks. Garvey was often mocked for his egotistical nature. Garvey portrayed himself as the Provisional President of Africa¹. Du Bois was critical of Garvey's radical thoughts and argued that they would create a white backlash and thus undermine their overall goal of equality. Garvey has also been criticised for creating divisions and hostility between African-Americans. Many critics argue that Garvey was essentially a racist. Garvey termed the phrase that was most profoundly used decades later by Malcolm X, "White Devils". However, Garveyites would refute this argument by arguing that he mostly stuck to nationalistic and not racist tones. During the waning period of his popularity, Garvey rather bizarrely had close relations with members of the white supremacist group, the Ku Klux Klan. This caused further resentment and the NAACP argued that Garvey was a traitor to his race. Like many other black leaders of his time, there has been a suspicion of his ideology. He has also been accused of

being a con artist and stealing large sum of money from poor working class blacks through his businesses such as the Black Star Line.

He has been heavily criticised for poor organisational and leadership skills. Garvey was often tricked into paying as much as ... times as much for ships for the Black Star line.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, Garvey is clearly a radical and highly controversial figure but few can deny his influence. He has been credited with providing direction to working class urban blacks. His importance was clear in the 1910s and 1920s and this could be seen with the decline and fragmentation of the UNIA after his deportation. This resulted in Black Nationalism ceasing to be a mass movement by the 1930s. Following Garvey, there was a lack of effective representation for urban blacks until the emergence of Malcolm X in the 1950s. Martin Luther King who pretty much ran counter to Garvey's belief said that Garvey " was the first man on a mass scale and level to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny. And make the Negroes feel he was somebody".

One person Garvey had a great influence on was Malcolm Little who later changed his slave surname to Malcolm X. In many ways, Garvey's legacy today was laying the seeds for the separatist movement to rapidly grow in the 1950s and 1960s with the Nation of Islam but especially Malcolm X.

Malcolm Little who was born in 1925 was indoctrinated with Garveyism from a young age as his parents Earl and Louis Little frequently attended Garvey rallies. However, Little was a petty thief until he reformed his ways in prison

and joined the Nation of Islam in 1952 and quickly rose to become one of its main leaders. Apart from its religious connotations, the philosophy of the Nation of Islam was similar to that of the UNIA as the Nation believed in segregation from whites and argued that Africa was their homeland and ultimately blacks should return to Africa. Thus he followed Pan-Africanism. They also stressed the need for black self-defense and self-reliance. Malcolm X rejected the integrationists' tactics of non-violence and insisted that blacks could and should use violence to protect themselves.

During his twelve years in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X's public beliefs were in line with the Nation of Islam and its revered leader Elijah Muhammad. However, it is worth noting that Malcolm X speaking on behalf of the Nation of Islam was much more provocative and racist than the UNIA and Garvey. The racial views of the Nation of Islam shocked many whites as well as black Americans. Malcolm X constantly argued that blacks were superior to white and until 1964, followed the Nation of Islam's teaching that whites were the creation of an evil scientist. However, his message was popular for many young urban blacks and he has been credited with the rapid growth of the Nation of Islam from 500 in 1952 to 52, 000 in 1963. The rise of the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X gave blacks a sense of pride and identity which had been absent since the deportation of Marcus Garvey and the demise of the UNIA.

Malcolm's arguments changed from being a messenger to Elijah Muhammad to being more focused on the Civil Rights struggle. Malcolm's unhappiness with the inactivity of the Nation of Islam during the Birmingham protest is one such example. He had clearly changed from religious to nationalistic

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talk. This along with Elijah's Muhammad's infidelity and Malcolm being frozen out after his condemnation of Kennedy following his assassination led to Malcolm leaving the Nation of Islam in 1964. There is a stark change of Malcolm X's philosophy after his split from the Nation of Islam. He visited Africa in 1964 and his meetings with white Muslims dramatically changed his viewpoint. He announced regret for his negative view of all whites. He set up a Black Nationalist organization and said that he was now willing to work with other civil rights leaders. Furthermore, Malcolm was willing to work with white Americans who promoted the cause for racial equality and he wanted his group, the Organisation of Afro-American to go worldwide so he could globalise the struggle for all African people. However, C. Eric Lincoln remains sceptical of Malcolm X's plans and argues that "Those who saw in the returned pilgrim to Mecca a "new" Malcolm X were at best probably premature in their judgements."

While King's audience often focused on the middle class blacks as well as sympathetic whites, Malcolm X's audience often focused on poor working class urban blacks who were often young and felt disillusioned with society and in particular the pace of reforms during the Civil Rights period. In many ways, Malcolm's followers were descendants of Garvey's movements in cities such as Harlem. Like Garvey, Malcolm had the persona but also the charisma to entice these African-Americans into the Nation of Islam. This can be best seen in Harlem where although Elijah Muhammad was the leader of the Nation of Islam, his messenger Malcolm X was effectively the leader for the urban blacks there. In cities like Harlem where many Blacks rejected Martin Luther King's philosophy of non-violence, Malcolm X was seen as a liberator

and Garvey's successor. Like Garvey, Malcolm set up a black newspaper called Muhammad Speaks which carried Elijah Muhammad's message.

However, similar to Garvey, Malcolm X was a highly controversial figure who had a number of critics that accused him and the Nation of Islam of being segregationists, hate mongers, seeking and speaking of violence and hindering the success of the Civil Rights movement. The then Supreme Court justice and first African-American on the bench Thurgood Marshall stated that the Nation of Islam were "run by a bunch of crooks" and discredit Malcolm X's achievement. Some who criticised Malcolm often focused heavily on his past of drug taking and stealing and argued that he made no positive contribution to society. He has been accused of putting his own personal safety ahead of the racial struggle. While King played a key role in the Birmingham protest of 1963, Malcolm resided in the safer area of Harlem. Few would accuse Malcolm of this in the last year of his life. He continued his rallies despite constant death threats from the Nation of Islam both to himself and to his young family and like Martin Luther King; Malcolm ultimately lost his life for his cause. However, although many blacks especially from the middle-class were heavily critical of his methods, they credited him with reforming his own ways. Therefore, Malcolm's philosophy during his time with the Nation of Islam which although didn't directly encourage violence but instead espoused violence was accepted by blacks in ghettos who haven't received the benefits of the civil rights reform but his message was largely rejected by middle class blacks.

It is hard to judge Malcolm X fully as he was assassinated very soon after recanting his racist views. However, there has been a great deal of analysis. <https://assignbuster.com/contributions-of-marcus-garvey-and-malcolm-x-history-essay/>

His supporters argue that Malcolm never promoted violence even during his time with the Nation of Islam. They argue that he was often associated with Black violence that he rejected and his positive influence could be seen by those meeting him. The prominent Black American politician Jesse Jackson mentions that “ As I reflect on the life of Malcolm X 40 years after his assassination, I do so with a keen understanding of the political, social and economic conditions in America.” This is clearly a valid point as not taking his arguments into historical context, Malcolm appears a racist violence seeker but many urban blacks who were living in dilapidated ghettos in the 1950s and 1960s clearly didn't see him this way.

However, one must question how successful Malcolm X was as he spent the majority of his working life espousing a violent, racist policy that he himself later regretted. However, perhaps his greatest contribution can be similar to that of Marcus Garvey of giving hope and identity to hundreds of African-Americans. Ironically, others argue that his greatest achievement may have been to provide a counter-weight to Martin Luther King. After his break from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm claimed that he put his extremist position and violent philosophy in order to make King's radical thoughts and demand for racial equality more acceptable to white Americans. Although Malcolm's claim sounds at best dubious, many would argue that the Nation of Islam and its most prominent member Malcolm X's counter-weight inadvertently aided the Civil Rights movement.