The Relationship Between Black Political Leadership and Mass Political Mobilization: The Los Angeles UNIA and the Problematics of Nationalism

Earlier this year, the Boston Review hosted an online forum on the power and potential of black movements called “The Future of Black Politics”. Initiating the discussion was Michael Dawson, professor of political science and Director of the Center for Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago. Framing black politics as African Americans’ ability to mobilize, influence policy, demand accountability from government officials, participate in American political discourse, and ultimately offer a democratic alternative to the status quo, Dawson identified the root of the contemporary failure of black politics as “the” black community’s inability to hold their elected officials accountable. The tendencies of the black middle-class elite to forge alliances with a neoliberal agenda that privileges markets over all other institutions and caters to corporate interests has resulted in the lack of an independent black progressive political movement that can fight both for black power and against the ravages of capitalism on behalf of all who are disadvantaged. What is needed in order to re-build black politics, he suggests, is a re-imagining of how black institutions and organizations can serve the needs of citizens and a reclamation of the black radical tradition. Central was the commitment to constructing democratic black “counterpublics” from the bottom up, giving voice to the black grassroots.¹

The primary reason for the re-constitution of an independent black public sphere

is not only to serve as a democratic check on the state, but also to create a space where
the black community can hold their leaders and elected officials accountable.² Here, the
critique of black middle class leadership and the neoliberal black elite’s not only
inability, but, often times, refusal to operate in the interests of African Americans is
undoubtedly accurate, and the need for black progressive leadership is put forth as the
clear and, rather un-complicated, solution. With E.Franklin Frazier’s challenge to the
black middle class in *Black Bourgeoisie* and Harold Curse’s challenge to black scholars in
*The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, the idea that there is a real juxtaposition between the
orientations of leadership and those of the everyday people that the leadership thinks they
are representing is not new. History, however, reveals to us a tenuous relationship
between even black progressive leadership and the task of mass mobilization.

In the early twentieth century, Marcus Garvey sought to provide a solution to the
black community’s leadership problem. He was able to identify the fact that the problem
was the black elite’s failure to adopt an agenda with the concerns of the larger black
population, and from the vantage point of the larger black population, in mind.
Ultimately, just as much of the black leadership could not explain the urban uprisings of
the 1960s, the leadership of the 1910s and 1920s could not explain the affect of
Garveyism. Frustrated by the mass resonance of Garvey’s philosophy, the leaders of the
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) wondered if he
was reflecting the true sentiments of the people whose interests they had believed they
were representing. But this is where curiosity arises. Scholars note Garvey’s
organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) for its unmatched

² Ibid.
mass support. They identify Black Nationalism as a strong force in black politics and black public opinion, even to the present-day. Why, then, is it that even with the expressed purpose of getting at the political expressions of the people, the largest international mass movement in the history of the black freedom struggle still failed?

The UNIA spearheaded a movement of unprecedented numbers of black Americans who sought to define a dignified existence for themselves outside of the dominant power of white American society. Prior to Garvey’s arrival, the NAACP was the most organized race group in the United States and presented the most organized challenge to racism in America. Committed to equal rights through aggressive legal action and pressure-group politics designed to mobilize public sentiment against racial atrocities, the NAACP was an organization of highly educated professionals. While they intended to organize the black masses to struggle for their rights, they were an organization that did not emerge within the black community or with the masses involved in shaping it. As Aldon Morris notes in his book about The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, while the masses respected the NAACP, their bureaucratic structure and procedures discouraged mass participation. Due to the abounding nature of political disfranchisement and lynching in the South, the region became increasingly important ground for an NAACP whose membership depended on its ability to mobilize around the promises of legislative justice and, in 1919, the NAACP’s Southern membership began to increase. However, after 1920, the NAACP suffered a sharp decline that lasted for most

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of the decade and, significantly, the years of the NAACP’s weakness coincided precisely with the UNIA’s rise. For Mary Rolinson, author of *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South,* the shift occurred because of black people’s prescient understanding of the 1920s as a decade of transition and recognition of the limited possibilities for the improvement of racial conditions.

However, if we look at the historical context in which the UNIA experienced its meteoric rise, what we observe is a people who are engaging in their own analysis and responses to their experiences. What they were profoundly interested in was an organization with an ideology that would speak to the intersection of both their material reality and their consciousness.

In his Introduction to *The Marcus Garvey Papers Project,* Robert Hill makes clear that the political ideology of the UNIA during its most formative years was developed in response to what was happening on the ground. Interested in theorizing for the masses, Garvey realized that the political program had to be malleable in order to fit the needs of their constituents. He was, in fact, the head of a progressive leadership. In the midst of the black racial militancy and mass resistance that emerged in the post-WWI period due to unprecedented levels of white racial violence both during and after the war, Garvey realized the need to move away from his renunciation of political participation and exclusive focus on Booker T. Washington’s nineteenth-century ethic of racial uplift through cultural self-improvement and organized benevolence. Hill notes that the primary task of the UNIA’s 1920 convention was the transformation of Garveyism into a political program for African independence and racial autonomy that could influence the struggle.

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for black rights. It was during this atmosphere of evolution that the Los Angeles UNIA came into existence.

The nationalist mood that characterized the black community after 1918 was undoubtedly visible in LA. The founders of the Los Angeles branch of the UNIA were activists in the black community who had been members of the Los Angeles Forum, a black organization open to blacks of all political and ideological persuasions but whose direction had become more and more nationalistic as the 1920s approached. Tellingly, in his study of The UNIA and Black Los Angeles, Emory Tolbert informs that “the Los Angeles Forum was not the only predecessor to the local Universal Negro Improvement Association, nor were the Garveyites the first in Los Angeles to attempt to organize blacks with clear black nationalist intentions.” Local leaders such as Hugh Gordon and John Coleman who were members of the Forum, ultimately joined the Garveyites precisely because Garveyism’s espousal of the hope for change through the collective strength of blacks was a formula that they had accepted prior to UNIA’s arrival. However, it was Marcus Garvey’s newly formed interpretation of black nationalism that accounted for the ideology’s rapid spread and inspired their following. 6

Tolbert’s study also gives us necessary insight into the black political landscape of 1920s Los Angeles. “The local NAACP was not a large organization before the local UNIA organized, therefore the Garveyites were not made up of former NAACP members in Los Angeles. Rather, both organizations began vying for popular support in the period between 1920 and 1922.”7 The local NAACP was headed by a “very affluent, old-


7 Ibid, 92.
resident leadership” whereas an “active, less wealthy black leadership group [were among] the ‘second-level’ black community leaders who adopted Garveyism.”

The targets for recruitment were a “large group of thrifty laborers ripe for organizing and determined to build better lives for their families.” The Los Angeles UNIA was unique for a couple of reasons. First, Los Angeles was a major population center in which many strata of the black population were represented and, second, due to their location on the West Coast and status as an “outpost” of the UNIA headquarters in Harlem, these Garveyites were “more than confident about their ability to decide their own fate and outline their own programs.”

Garvey’s plan required “identifying and recruiting as many local black leaders as possible [which, in turn,] drew thousands of local self-styled ideologists into his movement.” What we observe in this particular branch is “a rank and file that resisted regimentation and insisted upon independent action.”

A split eventually developed in the local branch itself regarding the matter of local control over UNIA activities. Noah Thompson, the middle-class leader of the branch, argued that the movement could best be served by strengthening local branches. Representing an elitist majority, he argued that the emphasis on black nationalism and the future establishment of a strong African government did not satisfy the local need for direct knowledge about the parent body’s use of funds and status of the Black Star Line. The Thompson faction was more attracted to the economic aspect of the UNIA, particularly local black financial investment and a renaissance of cooperative economics.

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8 Ibid, 94.
9 Ibid, 92.
10 Ibid, 88.
11 Ibid, 7.
The “insurgents,” however, were led by an illiterate organizer named Lucas Luke whose presence as a leader was, according to members of the Thompson group, an insult to the college-educated and literate leadership of the local UNIA. To working class, southern migrants the promise of black nationalism was that their potential would be realized in substantial programs. For these Garveyites, the most pressing objective was black unification and the creation of institutions to serve their own needs. It is evident that what led to the internal dissention of the LA UNIA was a discrepancy over the identification of what exactly “local needs” were. Interestingly, the Garveyites who were deemed the insurgents of the local branch were those who remained loyal to the parent body, while the Thompson faction split off to form the Pacific Coast Negro Improvement Association. It was this type of infighting that eventually led UNIA’s demise. It is worth noting, though, that what resonated with the insurgents was that which had taken decided prominence at the 1920 UNIA convention: a world perspective that included determining the best guarantee for social justice, focus on uplifting the disadvantaged, and stressing nationwide and international unity for the purposes of establishing an independent base of black power.

Therefore, the problem here was not that the leadership was middle-class in nature and therefore out-of-touch with a self-deterministic view of black politics. This form of Black Nationalism, while an admittedly elite discourse, was an ideology that was crafted with the purpose of reflecting the sociopolitical disposition of ordinary black folks. The problem was the leadership’s translation of how Garvey’s interpretation of Black Nationalism should look on the ground. This greatly complicates the process of mass mobilization because it problematizes the efficacy of black leadership’s ability to
theorize and conceptualize for the masses. When the LA UNIA’s nationalism began to be preoccupied with the issue of financial speculation, rather than altering the material realities of the people that they were supposed to be representing, a rift formed. The masses allowed themselves to be guided by this ideology because of a deep-rooted belief in the fundamental necessity of an autonomous political institution from which to make demands on the state, but also because of the UNIA’s new political program which suddenly made the revolutionary republicanist demand for social equality achievable through Garveyism. If the future of black politics relies on the resurgence of black progressive politics, then the issue of how black progressive leaders and intellectuals try to “read” the masses and reflect their sentiments in order to generate political mobilization is nothing short of essential.

Scholars such as Melayne Price are committed to demonstrating how, at a mass level, black folks continue move through the world and develop political thought with a Black Nationalist lens. However, as I have attempted to show through a focused analysis Garveyism’s local manifestations, affect is not enough. The masses rushed to the UNIA in the post-WWI period because they sought a militant defense of rights and resistance of the structure of the state rooted in an ethos of popular sovereignty.12 By paying attention to the differences between the LA UNIA’s leadership and rank-and-file regarding how Black Nationalist theory should be translated into practice, I hope to have demonstrated how, ordinary folks were approaching the creation of a more useful formulation of Black Nationalism and a more expansive view of independence. One which could have potentially proven to be the way forward for black politics and still holds many lessons

12 Hill, The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers Project.
for us today.