Tracing the Origins and Vision of Black Nationalism in the United States

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Abstract: During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Nationalism represented the desire of people to maintain their nation's sovereignty and independence. The foundation of Nationalism was the idea that people are linked to a geographical location and maintain a national identity based on a shared culture, political system, religion, language, and history. However, Black Nationalism's foundation was a bit different. The main goal of Black Nationalism was a need for unification and the socioeconomic and political autonomy of Blacks. In this paper, I trace the origins and vision of Black Nationalism, while highlighting the actions of several Black Nationalist groups throughout the years. Lastly, I address the current manifestation of the ideology.
Key Words: Black Nationalism, Liberation, Autonomy, Racial Pride

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I. Introduction

The realities of slavery and racial oppression gave birth to Black Nationalism in the early nineteenth century. As one of the oldest ideologies in American political thought, Black Nationalism advocated for racial pride, group self-reliance, and resistance to racism. (Shelby, 2003). It was a reaction against racism and the need for independence, self-sufficiency, economic autonomy, and political equality. Early proponents of Black Nationalism thought that the only way for African Americans to be fully free was by establishing their separate nation, away from America. However, upon the end of slavery in the United States, the call for emigration soon came to an end. In this paper, the discussion of Black Nationalism focuses on the vision of the ideology, highlights its commitment to racial pride, and its emphasis on the concept of "blackness." (Shelby, 2003)

II. Discussion

The Birth of Black Nationalism

During the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, many Black Nationalists' objectives had mostly to do with race. Their main goal was economic and social liberation, and the establishment of their nation-state in which they will have control over a geographical area, their own military power, and system of governance. (Moses, 1996, pp. 2-3) At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Black Nationalism reflected the desire to establish a nation either in Africa or in any other land, believing that the only way for Blacks to achieve autonomy was by leaving the United States and developing their political entity. The peak of this development came at the Emigration Convention in 1854 that was held in Cleveland, Ohio, by Martin Delany and other intellectuals who examined the possibility of Blacks emigrating somewhere else. The supporters of emigration argued that Blacks had to leave America and establish an independent nation in which they could live freely. (Essien-Udom, 1962)

The origins of Black Nationalism as an ideology can be found in David Walker's work, who was one of the very first individuals associated with the movement. Walker, an abolitionist, was concerned with the White system of oppression, the concept of self-governance, the establishment of racial pride and self-determination. Even though Walker is not categorized as a Black Nationalist, because the ideology was not as developed during his time, his view on Black liberation became an ideological foundation for Black Nationalism highlighting important issues such as the lack of unity in the Black community, and the monopoly of White supremacists. (Asukile, 1999) Walker urged for the abolition of slavery and advocated for the equal rights of Blacks in an era that speaking publicly about such issues was dangerous.

Dean Robinson (2001), in his work: *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*, argues that Black Nationalism was a reaction to the system of continuous oppression in the United States and divided Black Nationalism into two categories: 1) classical Black Nationalism, and 2) modern Black Nationalism. Classical Black Nationalism first appeared in 1865 and ended in 1925, adopting Westernized views on race and European models of nation-building. Modern Black Nationalism had more to do with the struggle for equality during the

Civil Rights era during the 1960s when advocates of Black Nationalism began to consider African models of nation-building. (Robinson, 2001)

Similarly, James L. Taylor (2011), in his work: *Black Nationalism in the United States: From Malcolm X to Barack Obama,* finds that Black Nationalism was an ideology that emerged as a response to white oppression, and a reaction to the cruel system of slavery. (Taylor, 2011) In his work *Black Identity: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalism,* Gordon (2006) maintains that Black Nationalism is a call for unity of individuals of African descent to get organized so that they can better control their lives and destiny. W.E.B. Du Bois is considered one of the primary figures of Black Nationalism, who urged Blacks to establish their institutions and develop their own economic resources. In his speech: *"A Negro Nation within the Nation,"* DuBois expressed his concerns about the continuous battle of African Americans against White supremacy and racism while calling for racial separation, economic independence, unity among African Americans, self-defense initiatives, and black pride. (Rucker, 2002, p.38)

Below, I highlight some of the most notable Black Nationalist organizations.

Garvey's Movement

Marcus Garvey's movement is considered one of the most important representations of Black Nationalism during the twentieth century. Garvey began to form his plan for the liberation of blacks in 1912. He envisioned a nation in which blacks would have their own system of governance, economic resources, and military powers. Garvey's era in the United States was a time filled with ideological debates and confusion. Garvey founded the *Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League* (UNIA), advocating for the return to Africa, and the establishment of an independent back nation whose laws and system of governance would reflect solely black interests. (McCartney, 1992, p. 83-84) One of the main strengths of his movement was its way of escaping assaults from Communists, Black conservatives, and many others. Regardless of the obstacles, Garvey fought bravely for his vision until his deportation from the United States in 1927. (Martin, 1976)

Black Power Movement

The Black Power Movement was sparked in 1965 after the assassination of Malcolm X. It reached its peak in the 1970s, emphasizing the establishment of institutions that would encourage the empowerment of Blacks at the social, political, and economic levels. The Black Panther Party supported the philosophies of the Black Power Movement. Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Charles V. Hamilton (1976), in their work: *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation,* argue that Black Power is about all Africans worldwide who had endured the cruelty of slavery and colonialism. They stated that: *"Black Power emerged among the masses in the 60's because of centuries of struggles by Africans worldwide, and that is why it affected Africans worldwide"* (p.195). They argued that Black Power was not simply a call for racial isolation, but rather, the need for equality and respect. (p.203) Peniel Joseph (2008) in his work: *Historians and the Black Power Movement*, argues that Black Power changed the American economy locally and nationally. By promoting the principles of self-determination, and racial pride, Black Power initiated debates about police practices against Blacks, poor housing conditions, public schools, and unemployment that remain ongoing issues for Blacks in America.

Free African Society

Among the very first Black Nationalist organizations founded was the Free African Society, which was established in Philadelphia, in 1787, by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. The organization's primary goal was to support freed Blacks and their communities in periods of crisis. Allen and Jones encouraged the idea of Black unity and engaged in various humanitarian activities. They eventually established churches whose purpose was to improve the quality of life of their members. Jones established St. Thomas Protestant Episcopal Church, and Allen established Bethel AME (African Methodist Episcopal). (Butler, 2005, p.71-72).

One of the main strengths of the Free African Society was its role in educating Blacks by organizing reading classes on Sundays, in an effort to bring members of the community together. Its main weakness was its failure to deal with its financial debt. The organization did not have enough financial support from the outside community, and that led to its end in 1794. Even though the organization did not last long, it set the foundation for future organizations and inspired many intellectuals with similar goals and visions for the Black community. (Wesley, 1935)

Nation of Islam

Nation of Islam was a Black Nationalist group, founded in 1930 by Wallace Fard Muhammad who became an essential figure of the organization by spreading the message that Black people's identity was stolen by Whites. Elijah Muhammad became his successor after his death in 1934. (Urban, 2015, p.94) In the 1960s

and 1970s, the organization established many chapters, and its purpose was to create a Black nation within the United States. Malcolm X became part of the organization after his release from prison in 1952. He traveled all over the United States speaking about the inferior status of Blacks in America while advocating for Black self-determination. (Walton and Smith, 2012, 137-138).

By 1964, Malcolm X had grown apart from the organization and after his assassination, there was a futile period for the NOI due to a lack of direction. Elijah Muhammad's son took over the leadership of the organization after his death but decided to adopt integrationist tactics, resulting in many White members joining the organization (Walton and Smith, 2012, p.137). In 1981, Louis Farrakhan joined the leadership of NOI, and the organization began to form a more radical character again. Farrakhan encouraged members to register to vote and supported Black candidates such as Harold Washington and Jesse Jackson. (Taylor, 2011, pp. 315-316). Today, NOI remains active, but its effectiveness and efficiency are low due to the lack of political goals and strong leadership. (Taylor, 2011)

One of the strengths of the Nation of Islam (NOI) was its ability to shape its followers' awareness, providing them a support system and giving them a sense of identity and confidence. Its poor financial management, however, eventually had caused tensions and dissatisfaction among its members.

Black Panther Party

The Black Panther Party was founded in 1966 in Oakland, California, by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. The Black Panther Party first began with the idea of self-defense and adopted a revolutionary approach, citing against capitalism. Nationally, the BPP organized several protests and fought for the elimination of crime and police brutality. During the 1960s and 1970s, the organization was considered one of the most radical Black Nationalist groups in the United States. (Dierenfield and White, 2012, p. 239)

In 1966, Seale and Newton officially established a program named *"Black Panther Party for Self-Defense"* against police brutality. In 1967, Eldridge Cleaver joined the Party and was the person behind the decision to drop *"For Self-Defense"* from its official name since the organization had begun to expand its vision and objectives. (Allen, 1969, p.222)

Even though the Black Panther Party was very skillful at the art of propaganda, many of its leading members became involved in various criminal acts, and that led to the downfall of the organization. (Harris, 2001, pp. 171-173)

Current Manifestations of Black Nationalism

Robert Smith (1996) in his work: *We have no Leaders: African Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era* argues that in the post-Civil Rights era, the American political system has failed to achieve the change that is required to face the existing problems of racial and economic inequality. (Smith, 1996) Similarly, Jalata, A. (2002), finds that the majority of African Americans still do not have full access to the political and economic resources of the nation. The absence of a national organization that can effectively organize the Black community and advocate for the demands of the Black majority is a crucial matter. Many African Americans still face issues, such as police brutality, poverty, unemployment, lack of proper education, and poor living conditions.

During the past couple of decades, we have witnessed the rise of a new class of Black political leaders who have taken a softer and less aggressive nationalistic approach. Whether this approach will benefit or not the Black community in America, is yet to be determined. Until then, it is fair to say that the fight for Black liberation continues.

III. Conclusion

Black Nationalism remains a strong force in Black political thought. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Black Nationalism emerged as a reaction to racial oppression and the need for greater autonomy of the Black community. One of the most successful Black Nationalists was Marcus Garvey whose ideas of black pride and economic independence influenced Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and many others who later formed their Black Nationalist groups. Still to this day, many of the themes fostered by Black Nationalism find relevance and significance within the Black communities in the United States in this ongoing fight for Black independence, self-determination, racial pride, and socioeconomic equality.

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