

The Two Epochs of Nation-Development: Is Black Nationalism a Form of Classical Nationalism?

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The dramatic resurgence of Negro nationalism, its emergence as a viable, authentic trend is one of the most significant developments of the present day Negro freedom scene. With the appearance of the Black Muslims, its most articulate and best organized manifestation, Negro Nationalism, for the first time since the Garvey movement, has attained the significance of a major mass trend. It is having a profound impact upon the Negro community, striking a deep chord among the lower masses, the most disprivileged section of the Negro population. Especially in the northern urban ghettos is this impact felt. It has entered the list to challenge the old guard assimilationist leadership. Any program having in view the unleashing of the vast revolutionary potential of the Negro people's liberation struggles must take into account and accurately assess this burgeoning nationalist component, its implications and importance with respect to the character and future direction of that struggle. Such an examination cannot be restricted to Muslim separation, which is only one manifestation of a broad trend, although the most vocal one.

If nationalism in its broad sense can be defined as an effort of a people to assert its identity and its dignity its human right to become master of its own destiny, then today Negro nationalism is indeed a broad and growing trend embracing the vast majority of the Negro people. It is rooted in their strivings to break out of the trap of racist economic and cultural subjugation; to assert their humanity as a free and equal people. This new mood of self-assertion, this search for identity, far from being restricted [end p. 257] to the Black Muslims or other avowed nationalist groups, ramifies throughout the entire spectrum of the present day Negro freedom struggle. It affects even those masses now under assimilationist leadership, and the Negro man in the street without organizational ties.

Negro nationalism as above defined is a catalyst-in the Negro civil rights revolt now sweeping up from its center in the South, bursting all regional barriers and exploding on all fronts. The unifying concept behind this movement is the Negro's new image of himself as belong to a people with a common destiny. A prime ingredient of this image is the Negro's determination to assume at whatever cost the upright posture of manhood and to right the wrongs of three centuries of slavery compounded by a century of fustian freedom. In this drive for self-realization and ethnic identity, a new Negro personality emerges. Its elements are pride, dignity and self-reliance. It pictures a people freeing itself from the entrapment of inferiority, reclaiming its stolen history, a people with a great past and a greater future, a people who have produced great men and women: poets, statesmen' scientists, heroes. It is a people recognizing its own great revolutionary traditions manifested in the struggle against chattel slavery, the Civil War, the battle of Reconstruction; a people proud of their link to ancient African culture and the

achievements of the newly emerged African nations with which they identify. Especially among the youth is there a reaffirmation of the value of the Negro experience. As James Baldwin put it:

That son who is forced to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and life that no school on earth—and indeed no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind words. [1]

The Negro rebounds with an assertive nationalism from the blows of racism, using nationalism as a weapon against oppression and racist ideology. It is accompanied by a growing skepticism—ranging to violent rejection of the values and behavior patterns of the white power structure. Columnist Walter Lippman is whistling in the dark when he writes [end p. 258] that “American Negroes are asking only for their lawful rights . . . (but) the American Negro movement is not at all revolutionary, as we have seen the anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia.” He is indulging in wishful thinking when he says that the Negro is merely trying to join the whites “inside the existing American social order.” [2]

The refrain of the non-revolutionary character of the current Negro upsurge is repeated ad nauseum by the Alsops, Harry Ashmores and other writers in an attempt to confuse and distort the new objectives of the struggle and to contain the movement within the old framework of middle class assimilationist goals.

The Negro's new concept of equality rejects the idea of acceptance into the existing power structure at the price of conforming to the standards and values set by the white rulers. Even if this goal were attainable, its content is paternalism in which he would continue to be less than equal, and assimilation would amount to losing his identity and foregoing his rights to a future as a people. On the contrary, Negro self-realization demands a status affording him control of his own affairs, determination of his future as a people, and assertion of his dignity, self-respect and pride.

As E.U. Essien Udom puts it, “... a status which enables him to recover a world in which they can enjoy an unashamed sense of identity and vindicate their honor as Black Americans.” [3]

It is not accidental that the main thrust of the reawakening comes from the Negro youth, who are the spearhead of the drive for identity. Caught up in what has been called “the revolution of expectancy,” Negro youth refuse the status of forebears, the status of indefinitely waiting for recognition of Negro rights and human dignity.

The temper of the youth is often expressed in strident disaffection, in a rejection of any possibility of adjustment within the white-dominated power structure, in skepticism tantamount to a vote of no confidence in the desire or ability of the United States white rulers to live up to their promises and pretenses of recognizing elementary human rights

of the Negro sub-citizens. The element of hope, an essential ingredient of the civil rights upsurge, is also present. An awareness grows among Negroes that they push for freedom from positions of strength. They are gaining a consciousness that the balance of world forces has shifted in their favor; that their struggle takes place in conditions of irreversible, revolutionary world change; that their fight for freedom is inseparably part of the globe-encircling revolt of the earth's downtrodden colored people. [end p. 259]

Negro nationalism is not alien or new to the American scene, as some writers pretend. Historically, it has been a basic and continuing theme in Negro protest. In modern times, it has been a steady undercurrent in the national Negro community, existing side by side with the dominant integrationist-assimilationist trend. Submerged by the latter in so-called "normal" times, Negro nationalism surges forth in times of stress and crisis, and in the absence or weakness of a revolutionary third trend, posing an alternative, it is apt to take the form of mass separatist movements such as the Garvey movement in the early 1920s and the Black Muslim movement of the present day. Not since the Garvey movement has the Negro nationalist trend achieved the dynamic and all-embracing character of the present resurgence. What is new is the stepped up urgency of the Negro's demand for freedom.

The growth of Negro nationalist sentiment is a positive development in itself. It is in fact an essential precondition for the emergence of a national revolutionary movement. The Negro population in the United States has been historically subjected to all-out psychological warfare intended to prevent it from fighting for its rights. This warfare has taken several forms:

- 1) The lynch law of the South and police brutality in the north: to intimidate.
- 2) Paternalistic concessions and philanthropy, on both a personal and organized basis, to prevent Negroes from leading their own struggles.
- 3) Conditioning the Negro people to believe profoundly in their own unworthiness. The white chauvinist version of history of Africa and of the Negro people in America predominant in United States publications and educational institutions, the racist content of popular culture, as well as the overwhelming influence of the Negro church has inculcated a deep feeling of unworthiness and humility.
- 4) Encouragement of the illusion that militant struggle is hopeless, since Negroes as a minority dare not fight for their rights.

All the above methods of ideological and political domination are now challenged by Negro nationalism. They are an essential prop to Negro oppression because, far from being isolated and impotent, the Negro movement represents a terrible potential threat to the existing power structure. This accounts for the nearly hysterical reaction against Negro nationalism in ruling circles, as well as among liberal "friends" of the Negro.

The growth of nationalist sentiment is a step in the right direction, because it builds up self-confidence and a fighting spirit. The basic significance of Negro nationalism is in the attempt to set an independent course for the movement; to shake off the dead hand of liberalism, paternalism, gradualism, and dependency which has plagued the modern Negro movement since its inception. But this trend has yet to crystallize into a clear-cut work- [end p. 260] able political program.

All objective factors point to the growth of Negro nationalism. The problem is to channelize this sentiment into a revolutionary direction. But the emerging revolutionary forces will utterly fail in this task if they allow themselves to trail, either ideologically or politically, the ghetto petty-bourgeois leadership of the nationalist movement. [end p. 261]

SOME THEORIES THAT ATTEMPT TO DENY THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF THE BLACK MOVEMENT

Consistent with their direct integration or assimilationist orientation, the Communist Party theoreticians take special pains to be absolutely certain that all the elements of nationhood as defined by Stalin are not only present, but are maturing before the CPUSA can support a Negro national revolutionary movement. They insist that the Negro people in the deep south must take the “classic road to the formation of a nation” as precondition for continuing to support the principle of self-determination.

For example, James S. Allen contends that the Negro movement in the deep south will not take an autonomous direction because the Negroes there lack the most essential elements of nationhood, that is, common territory and economic life. These, he contends, are in the process of disintegration as the result of the “. . . forces of capitalist development of great expansive power, which has lasted well into the era of monopoly and imperialism.” [4] As a result, the struggle for equal rights has not taken the “classic road of the formation of a nation in the Black Belt area,” as supposedly envisioned by the CPUSA when it first put forth the principle of the right of self-determination. The Negro movement, he contends, has developed along other lines, “predominantly in the direction of integration.” In failing to fully appreciate these “specific characteristics of the development of the Negro people in the U.S. . . . the party got fixed into immutable positions not in accordance with reality.”

Specifically, he charges that the Party's program with respect to the Negro nation and the right of self-determination was the result of a “mechanical, inflexible, unhistorical approach both to the theory of nation and the national program.”

First of all, where, we must ask, does Allen expect to find an oppressed Nation in the epoch of imperialism taking the “classic road” to formation of nations? His repeated reference to the “classic period” of formation of nations in respect to the Negro question, it seems to us, simply reveals his own unclarity concerning the national question of the epoch of imperialism.

“Imperialism,” says Lenin, “is the progressive oppression of the nations of the world by a handful of great powers. It is the epoch of war among them for the widening and strengthening of national oppression This is precisely why the central point in the Social Democratic Party must be the distinction between oppressing and oppressed nations, which is the essence of imperialism which is falsely evaded by the social chauvinist.” [5] [end p. 262]

We are dealing here with the specific Negro nation in the context of the extreme crisis of world imperialism, a main feature of which is the collapse of the system of national-colonial oppression. We are dealing with a submerged nation in the heartland of U.S. imperialism, the main bulwark of the collapsing colonial system.

Allen's dogmatic strictures would make the development of a national movement for autonomy and self-determination contingent upon the “maturing” of all elements of nationhood of this oppressed nation. It is, however an elementary truth that universally, imperialist policy with regard to the national question is designed *forcibly to arrest and distort the free development of nations*. To maintain their economic and cultural backwardness as an essential condition for the extraction of super-profits. Is it not clear that the application of this policy operates to obstruct, warp, and distort the development of the elements of nationhood among oppressed peoples? That is, common territory, economic life, language, and culture?

Now, then, can any serious student of the *contemporary* national question make our support of autonomy, including the right of self-determination of Negroes contingent upon the *maturing* of all elements of nationhood among them? Clearly, the logic of such a position, were we to apply it to the question of oppressed nations generally, would be to deny the right of self-determination to a whole number of peoples suffering under the yoke of imperialist oppression and, by virtue of this oppression, the maturing of all the elements of nationhood among them has been prevented. Indeed, Allen's logic, if applied to the national-colonial question generally, would deny the right of self-determination to a number of the emerging nations in Negro Africa and elsewhere, among whom the requisites of nationhood exist only in extremely rudimentary form.

Is not this position objectively close to apology for continued imperialist political domination of so-called “backward peoples?”

The dialectical fact, which Allen and others seem to miss, is that imperialist oppression, in stifling the development of nations, created the conditions for the rise of national revolutionary movements which, in this epoch, are a special phase of the struggle for socialism. This creates the basis for the revolutionary alliance of the oppressed peoples with the international working class in the struggle against the common enemy, capitalist imperialism.

Allen is indeed on shaky ground when he lectures on our “unhistoric approach to the theory of nations” when he himself confuses the classic period [end p. 263] with the imperialist epoch.

In insisting upon the “classic road” with respect to the Negro national liberation movement, Allen clearly violates an elementary requirement of Marxist-Leninist theory: that is, the necessity of distinguishing between *two radically different epochs of capitalism with respect to nations and national movements*:

1) The *classic period*—the victory of capitalism over feudalism—the epoch of bourgeois revolution, which witnessed the formation of big capitalist national states in Europe and the United States.

2) The *imperialist epoch*, when these nations, having long completed their bourgeois democratic transformation, have become powerful imperialist states oppressing these left behind—the overwhelming majority of mankind, who can achieve national liberation only via the path of revolutionary struggle in alliance with the working class against imperialism.

In the United States, the second bourgeois democratic revolution of the Civil War and Reconstruction, while abolishing chattel slavery, stopped short of carrying through the land revolution and guaranteeing full citizenship rights for the Negro freedmen. The betrayal of Reconstruction blasted the [end p. 264] Negroes’ hopes for democratic integration into U.S. national life on the basis of equality. With the advent of imperialism, the dominance of trusts and monopolies at the turn of the century riveted tighter the yoke of Negro bondage, with the result that he was thrust further outside the pale of U. S. democracy into deeper isolation within his own group. The possibility for peaceful, democratic integration into the U. S. mainstream was definitely precluded. Henceforth, an effective struggle for Negro equality had to take the form of a struggle of an oppressed nation for special political guaranties to ensure its freedom.

In correcting our “unhistoric approach” it appears that Allen blurs over this distinction. He fails to take into account Lenin's principle:

The categorical demand of Marxian theory in examining any social question is that it be placed within definite historical limits, and if it refers to one country (e.g. the national program of a given country) that the concrete peculiarities that distinguish that country from others within the same political epoch be taken into account [6]

While Allen makes a bold attempt to discuss the “concrete peculiarities” of the Negro national question in the United States, he fails to take into account the “historical epoch.” His dogmatic, unhistorical approach explains his confusion with respect to the elements of nationhood. Concerning this question, Stalin said:

... the elements of nationhood—language, territory, culture, etc.—did not fall from the skies, but were evolved gradually in the pre-capitalist period. But these elements were in a rudimentary state and at best, were only a potentiality, that is, they constituted the possibility of the formation of a nation in the future given certain favorable conditions. The potentiality became a reality only in the period of rising capitalism with its national market and its economic, cultural centers. [7]

In the classic epoch, the epoch of transition to capitalism, favorable circumstances for the

conversion of this potentiality into a reality was the bourgeois-democratic revolution—the overthrow of feudalism. In the present, imperialist epoch, the epoch of transition to socialism, the essential condition for the full development of oppressed nations is the overthrow of imperialist oppression and domination of weaker nations.

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FOOTNOTES

1. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 113.
2. *Washington Post*, 8/29/1963.
3. E.U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, p. 4.
4. James S. Allen, “Some New Data Towards Understanding the Position of Negroes in the U.S. Today,” Discussion Bulletin No. 2 for the 16th National Convention, CPUSA, 11/27/1956
5. V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, V:284.
6. *Ibid.*, IV:225
7. J. Stalin, *The National Question and Leninism*. Pamphlet.