

**Pan-Africanism and the
Contributions of Black Intellectuals:
The legacies of George Padmore
and Marcus Garvey**

written by Bernice Mwaura

The period between the end of the 1800s up until the 1970's was a significant and tumultuous stage in charting the present and future of black people in the Americas and Africa. The 1863 Emancipation Proclamation set off a chain of events in North America that would see some progress and major setbacks in the struggle for racial equality. The movement toward emancipation of enslaved black populations was progress but this was followed by the tumultuous Reconstruction Period, Jim Crow laws as well as the 1884 Berlin Conference that placed the second-largest land mass on Earth in direct control of imperial powers. It should come as no surprise then that this period was marked by the rise of what historians Manning Marable and Anthony Bogues describe as the "black radical intellectual tradition (Bouges, 2016, 13)", represented by African Americans, Africans and individuals from the Caribbean who were concerned with envisioning a better future for black people all around the world. Two important figures from this history of black radical intellectual tradition will be thoroughly analyzed in the scope of this essay: George Padmore and Marcus Garvey. These intellectuals were ultimately both committed to the betterment of the black condition, however their approaches to this end, through Pan-Africanism, tended to differ. This essay aims to highlight elements of their legacies and differences in their ideologies that drove a wedge between them.

George Padmore is one of the most important figures in the history of Pan-Africanism and African emancipation and yet, as historian Bill Schwarz explains Padmore "barely registers in contemporary historical memory (Schwarz, 2019, 134)". It is difficult to explain why there was so little initially

written about Padmore given his life-long contributions to Pan-Africanist thought but one of the first accounts that detailed events in his life was penned by his close compatriot CLR James. In the early 1960s James released an unpublished manuscript *Notes on the Life of George Padmore* detailing their childhood in Trinidad, Padmore's gradual development as a militant revolutionary (James, n. d., 6) and emergence as an ardent functionary of Communism. Padmore was born Malcolm Meredith Nurse in the early 1900s to a "well-regarded elementary teacher (Schwarz, 2019, 132)". He had a flair for writing that is witnessed in his teenage years spent as a reporter for the *Trinidad Guardian* and he eventually travelled to the United States in pursuit of higher education. It is in America that he developed a militant consciousness that would come to shape the rest of his life. He transferred between various universities; Fisk, New York University and Howard before ultimately dropping out of academic pursuits and becoming a fully fledged member of the American Communist Party. His early political activity considerably impressed the party who granted him "one-way tickets to Moscow (Schwarz, 2019, 132)" to serve as the head of the Negro Bureau at the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU).

In this elevated position Padmore was able to define himself as an "expert on the colonial and racial question (Schwarz, 2019, 134)". In 1931 he penned *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* arguing that Negroes around the world were exploited "as a class and as a nation" (Schwarz, 2019, 136) and that the source of this exploitation was in the "systems of" (Schwarz, 2019, 136) capitalism. He also took charge as editor of *The Negro Worker*, a publication that framed the plight of black labourers

across Africa, the Americas and the “Atlantic world (Schwarz, 2019, 135)”. Another major achievement was his involvement in the organization of lectures and conferences for black delegates from all around the world. The first of these conferences was successfully held in Hamburg in 1930 but was most certainly an arduous venture to pull off. Both James and Schwarz detail his “clandestine missions (Schwarz, 2019, 135)” around the globe as he arranged passports, disguises, and routes for delegates from surveillance states like South Africa. These conferences formed integral networks of Pan-African intellectuals and radicals who had concerned themselves chiefly with the black condition and would develop the consciousness of future African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya. From 1933 however, Padmore noted the Soviet Union’s shifting foreign policy toward imperialism as it aligned itself with Western nations to take a stance against the incoming threat of Fascism. Padmore became disillusioned with this policy as Moscow wound back support for “anti-imperialist campaigns (Schwarz, 2019, 137)”. He resigned from his position and moved to London from where he would continue organizing, pen Africa and World Peace in 1937, Pan-Africanism or Communism in 1956 before finally moving to Ghana to support Nkrumah as they worked toward their vision of a united “African constituency” (Tunteng, 1974, 42).

Meanwhile, Padmore’s predecessor Marcus Garvey has been cited as the “most famous West Indian of all time” (Schwarz, 2019, 134). Garvey occupies a complicated position in Pan-Africanist history as his legacy has been marred by contradictions, inflammatory remarks

and a steamship scandal that was the topic of heavy criticism from WEB Du Bois. At the same time, his contributions to the betterment of the black condition cannot be understated. Garvey was a trailblazer in the realm of black nationalism, a gifted orator and writer who managed to instill an incessant spirit of black pride in black people around the globe. Garvey’s legacy would come to inspire the next wave of black intellectuals including James and Padmore who read his newspaper *The Negro World* in Trinidad during their adolescent years. Like Padmore, Garvey’s travels outside of Jamaica, his country of birth, made him acutely aware of the subjugation and racial relegation of black people. Historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses frames the issue, wherever Garvey went “white people ruled and black people were subordinate” (Wilson, 2004, 236). He returned to Jamaica in 1914 and formed the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) with a goal of “uniting all the Negroes in the world into one great organization” (Rogers, 1955, 158). UNIA organized “large public meetings” (Wilson, 2004, 240) that attracted big crowds, but Garvey grew ambitious about spreading his message outside of the Caribbean and into the American mainstream. He also grew interested in building a trade school in Jamaica on par with the Tuskegee Institute headed by educator Booker T Washington. He solicited Washington’s assistance and made plans to meet him, but Washington died in 1915 a few months before Garvey’s arrival.

Garvey travelled to the United States and was met with a country deeply fractured by racial tensions, fallout from the First World War and difficult economic conditions. The year 1915 had also marked the resurgence of the Ku

Klux Klan whose cells were “rapidly spreading across the country” (Rogers, 1955, 154) and whose continued aim was the terrorising and lynching of black men. In the matter of a year Garvey catapulted himself as a “leader of an impressive organization” (Wilson, 2004, 243) as he tapped into the “anger and resentment” (Wilson, 2004, 234) that black Americans felt and their aversion to “prospects of racial integration” (Wilson, 2004, 234). He based the American chapter of UNIA in New York as more black Americans became aligned with his message. At its peak UNIA membership was between “30,000 and 80,000” (Wilson, 2004, 248) people. Garvey built his philosophy on Afrocentricity and a belief in a “glorious” (Wilson, 2004, 242) past of African civilizations. He utilized Biblical script to envision an alternate reality for major figures in Christianity; Jesus was repositioned as a black individual while demonic entities were “white” (Rogers, 1955, 158). To this end he also founded an “African Orthodox Church” (Rogers, 1955, 159) that campaigned against the idea of a “white God” (Rogers, 1955, 242). In keeping with instilling a sense of pride in black people Garvey took on a messianic persona, his passionate oration and grandiose regalia served to cast him as a “Black Moses” (Wilson, 2004, 250) in the eyes of contemporaries. Garvey’s personality cult inspired a legion of African Americans to believe that he was destined to lead them out of the “house of bondage” (Wilson, 2004, 250) and into the promised land in Africa. This return to the continent was dubbed the Back-to-Africa movement that would be accomplished by building an extensive and powerful black nation in Africa.

To get this grand scheme rolling Garvey centered another aspect of his

philosophy on “business enterprise” (Wilson, 2004, 247). UNIA was successful in raising “large amounts of capital” (Wilson, 2004, 247) from membership fees and donations. Much of this capital was also acquired from selling shares of his steamship company The Black Star Line which would eventually be utilized to transport African Americans to the continent during the “time of the great migration” (Rogers, 1955, 161). Unfortunately, this company was riddled with mismanagement and by this point Garvey had become a subversive in the eyes of American national security. Garvey had become increasingly irrational and refused to “face an unacceptable reality” (Wilson, 2004, 232) that his grandiose vision for a black nation would not come to fruition. He was arrested in 1922 under mail fraud charges, indicted in 1923 and subsequently deported from the USA in 1927 from where he returned to Jamaica. He spent his latter years attempting to expand the reach of UNIA outside of the Americas but eventually succumbed to a stroke and passed away in 1940.

Both Padmore and Garvey were important figures and made significant contributions to the Pan-Africanist movement. However, these men differed in their approaches to Pan-Africanism and thus this caused tensions between them. Publicly, run-ins between Padmore and Garvey always ended in clashing or debate. When Garvey moved to London following his deportation from America, Padmore and James made it a point to attend his meetings, “heckle him and generally expose him” (James, n. d., 31) as a fraud. James details the odd significance these occurrences were as he and Padmore positioned themselves as the “leaders of the struggle against

imperialism in London” (James, n. d., 31) by denouncing another supposed West Indian emancipation leader. It is evident that their differing positionality in regard to Capitalism and Communism, Afrocentrism and Imperialism was sure to put them at odds with each other.

Padmore and Garvey were diametrically opposed due to their respective stances on Capitalism and Communism. Padmore was a Marxist who believed in only one way to “eliminate all injustices: the overthrow of capitalism” (Tunteng, 1974, 33). He wrote extensively about the exploitation of black workers all around the world by “capitalist exploiters in order to extract super-profits” (Padmore, 1931, 78) in *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers*. He spoke of prescient revolutionary movements that would revolt against “the common enemy – World Capitalism” (Padmore, 1931, 7). Garvey on the other hand was an intellectual who saw opportunity in Capitalism as a means to alleviate black people out of abject poverty. In fact, Historian Wilson Jeremiah argues that the major reason black Americans were so attracted to Garvey was “less for his showmanship than because of his commitment to black economic power” (Wilson, 2004, 251). Garvey appealed to commercial values and “attitudes of self-help” (Wilson, 2004, 248) that could potentially elevate the black economic future and place them in a position of power. His enterprise through the Black Star Line and smaller businesses throughout the country signalled to black Americans that they too had opportunity through capitalism to build and retain wealth in their own communities. In this regard Padmore was viciously critical of Garvey and warned his readers to evade the illusions of Garveyism arguing that it was a

“reactionary expression in Negro bourgeois nationalism” (Padmore, 1931, 126). Even after Padmore repudiated his association to Communism he still avoided a Capitalist interpretation of his work choosing rather in Pan-Africanism or Communism to urge that Africans rely on their own systems of knowledge.

The other major difference between Padmore and Garvey was in their interpretation of Afrocentricity and is evidenced in the scope of their work. Afrocentric ideology can be described as calling for a “worldwide unity among All African peoples, whether in Europe, Africa, or the New World” (Wilson, 2004, 237) due to their common ancestral heritage. But Afrocentrism can take on differing interpretations, on one hand it appears as a foundational tenet in Pan-Africanism and at the same time it can appear as a counter/remedy to the European hegemony, or Eurocentrism, by seeking solutions in African systems of knowledge. If WEB Du Bois was the father of Pan Africanism, then Padmore was the “Father of African Emancipation” (Trewhela, 1988, 42). Padmore located the scope of his work on advocating for and championing the anti-imperialist struggle. His interpretation of Afrocentrism centered the African continent first above all things. Thus, he was in constant dialogue with the continent and worked to build networks with African anti-imperialist leaders such as Nkrumah, Kenyatta and Haile Selassie. He took on a prominent role in the organization the International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFFA) after the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia by Italy. He also eventually moved to West Africa and became a close advisor to Nkrumah as they deliberated a Pan-African vision for the continent. Garvey on the other hand inspired numerous African

intellectuals but the scope of his work focused on the diasporic African community. His vision of a black state in Africa, and self-proclamation as the President of Africa was not done with any consultation to actual Africans on the continent. His Afrocentrism focused on building a consciousness among diasporic Africans but did not accurately address Africa. In fact, Liberia was entirely suspicious of Garvey's self-positioning as the President of Africa as they feared Garvey planned to set up his black nation within the country. Nkrumah would also come to explain that "Garvey's ideology was concerned with black nationalism as opposed to African nationalism" (qtd in Tunteng, 37).

Finally, another key difference between Padmore and Garvey is witnessed in their attitudes toward imperialism. Throughout his books and articles, Padmore's inherent aversion to imperialism is clear. He cites it as a brutal and inhuman institution that needed to be uprooted in its entirety. He went on to "stretch the concept of fascism" (Schwarz, 2019, 139) to argue that colonialism was "transmuting into a mode of fascism" (Schwarz, 2019, 141). Garvey on the other hand has had contradictory moments in his attitude to imperialism. He criticized colonialism and imperialism in the essay Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World but would also come to associate himself with British imperialists in London as he exhibited gratitude for their 'civilizing mission' in Africa. Moreover, scholar Jérémie Dagnini details Garvey's hope that one day "the Black race would produce its own Hitler" (Dagnini, 2008, 202). These types of sentiments reveal an alignment that Garvey had to imperialism, perhaps not in its subjugation of black people but rather Garvey appears to have admired

the global power imperialism had consolidated and wished for that to be emulated by his black nation.

These were the major ideological differences between Padmore and Garvey's approaches but ultimately both men must be lauded for the contributions they made to Pan-Africanism and the anti-imperialist struggle. Padmore, in later years would come to celebrate Garvey's life and accomplishments indicating that while these intellectuals had differed, they were united in their desire to see the improvement of the black experience across the world.

References

- Adi, H. (2018). Pan-Africanism: a history. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Bogues, A. (2016). Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals London: Routledge.
- Dagnini, J. (2008). "Marcus Garvey: A Controversial Figure in the History of Pan-Africanism." *The Journal of Pan African studies* 2(3): 198–208.
- James, C. L. R. (n.d.) Notes on the Life of George Padmore Place of publication not identified.
- Marable, M. (1987). African and Caribbean Politics: from Kwame Nkrumah to the Grenada Revolution London: Verso.
- Moses, W. J. (2004). Creative Conflict in African American Thought Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Padmore, G. (1931). The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers. Borgo Press.
- Rogers, B. F. (1955). "William E. B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, and Pan-Africa." *The Journal of Negro History* 40(2): 154-65.
- Schwarz, B. (2019). West Indian Intellectuals in Britain Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.
- Trewhela, P. (1988). "George Padmore: A Critique. Pan Africanism or Marxism." *Searchlight South Africa* 1(1): 42-63.
- Tunteng, P. K. (1974). "George Padmore's Impact on Africa: A Critical Appraisal." *Phylon* (1960) 35(1): 33-44.