



**GARVEY, AFRICA AND US:
WITHOUT COMPROMISE OR APOLOGY**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

The month of August opens for us a special space and time to pay rightful homage to the life and legacy of one of the great pan-African leaders of the 20th century, and the father of modern Black nationalism as an emancipatory political and cultural project, the Honorable Marcus Mosiah Garvey (August 17, 1887). Mr. Garvey teaches us, above all, to understand and embrace Africa as an ancient, honorable and instructive source of our *identity*, a compelling present focus of our *duty* and a promising site of our shared *destiny* as an African people. For he reasoned, to be free and “come into the fullness of ourselves”, we must, as Africans, play a critical role in the radical transformation of the world, transforming our own selves and the conditions of our lives in the process. And this requires liberational work and struggle directed toward freeing the African continent and the world African community and linking this to the liberation of humanity as a whole and, by extension, the well-being of the world.

Garvey’s project is self-consciously an ethical and emancipatory one, posing African liberation, as a just and righteous struggle, important not only for African self-formation and redemption, but also to human freedom. Therefore, he says that members of the UNIA “have decided that we shall go forward, upward and onward toward the great goal of human liberty,” and “to lift ourselves and to demand respect of all humanity.” Thus, “We declare to the world Africa must be free, that the entire (Black) race must be emancipated from industrial bondage, peonage and serfdom.” This inclusive liberation linked to the larger struggle for human freedom, Garvey asserts, is “a program we believe to be righteous; we believe it to be just.” And therefore, “we make no compromise, we make no apology in this our declaration.”

Pointedly, Garvey places his project firmly within the tradition of Black radicalism, stating that it is unavoidably radical, given its emancipatory thrust of moving from oppression and subjugation to freedom. He notes that people “who are endeavoring to get freedom” are, of necessity, radical. For “they cannot be anything else because they are revolting against the conditions that exist.” He continues arguing that “Conditions as they exist reveal a conservative state, and if you desire to change these conditions, you must be a radical. I am therefore satisfied to be the same kind of radical, if through radicalism I can free Africa.”

Moreover, he observes that “we are living in a temporal material age, an age of activity, an age of racial, (and) national selfishness.” But in his redemptive, liberational project, Garvey emphasizes the ethical imperative to avoid the “national selfishness” of oppressive and chauvinistic nations. Indeed, he said “I pray God that we shall never use our physical prowess to oppress the human race, but we shall use our strength, physically, morally and otherwise to preserve humanity and civilization.”

As Africans planning and forging our future, Garvey argues, we must have as our firm foundation principles and qualities that are life-affirming and life-enhancing. Thus, he says “Let us in shaping our own Destiny set before us the qualities of human justice, love, charity, mercy and equity.” In this ethical commitment, Garvey maintains “Africa has still its lessons to teach the world.” For “we will teach man the way to life and peace, not by ignoring the rights of our brother, but by giving to everyone his due.” Indeed, “the hand of justice, freedom and liberty shall be extended to all mankind.”

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In a strong and unwavering defense of both human rights and the right to radical resistance to defend and secure them, he states that “present day statesmen are making the biggest blunder of the age, if they believe that there can be any peace without equity and justice to all mankind.” For where there is oppression, there is resistance and there can be no real peace without justice, and no equality or equity without freedom. Indeed, as Mary McLeod Bethune, his contemporary taught, “the great measuring rod of justice and fellowship” to all humankind is indispensable to human freedom and human flourishing.

Anticipating Frantz Fanon’s concept of Europe as a civilization against itself, “swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration,” Garvey poses a similar critique of the current world powers, and again stresses our critical role in a massive world transformation in the interests of ourselves and all humankind. He says: “We are circumvented today by environments more dangerous than those which circumvented other peoples in any other age. We are face to face with environments in a civilization that is highly developed, a civilization that is competing with itself for its own destruction; a civilization that cannot last because it has no spiritual foundation, a civilization that is vicious, crafty, dishonest, immoral, irreligious and corrupt.” In a word, it will fall from its own internal contradictions, from the weight of its own unworthiness, imploding from its failure to respect the rights, dignity and interests of all involved and build social

systems that serve the common and greater good.

Indeed, Garvey rightly sees the addictive cultivation of self-illusion and self-satisfaction by the elites and the radical and increasing discontent of the masses directed toward struggle and liberation. Thus, he says, “a small percentage of the world’s populace feel(s) happy and content with this civilization” and how it has evolved and is evolving. But “the masses of the human race on the other hand (are) dissatisfied and discontented” with the current “arrangement of human society.” Indeed, humanity as a whole “is universally disturbed because of the injustices inflicted upon the masses by the dominant powers” and “determined to destroy the systems that hold up such a society and prop up such a civilization.” At this critical juncture of conflict and radical social change, Africans “are called upon to play their part,” wage righteous struggle, and “evolve a national ideal, based on freedom, human liberty and true democracy.”

Clearly, Garvey’s liberational project is aimed toward an expansive concept of our identity and duty as Africans and as humans. It is one in which we are not to pursue selfish ends as persons or a people, but those ends that serve and secure an inclusive human good. Thus, he says, calling us to embrace an expansive conception of ourselves and our interests, “the ends you serve that are selfish will take you no further than yourself, but the ends you serve that are for all, in common, will take you even to eternity.”

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