

Caribbean Black Nationalism: The Problems of Black Self-Rule in the 20th Century Caribbean

By [Tina Renier](#)

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The ideologies and struggles of de-colonization were geared at dismantling white supremacy and political and economic domination of the domestic affairs of Caribbean states by metropolitan powers in an effort to create modern nations with the status of being self-autonomous.

In addition, these modern nations experienced gross challenges because institutionalized colonial structures perpetuated stratified social structures in which the black masses were unable to transform the present political arrangements. Psychological fractures in which the personal and collective identities of Caribbean people were relegated to an inferior position and the brown middle classes wore the robes of the European colonizers in which they inherited enormous social privileges to oppress the proletariat and lumpenproletariat.

Consequently, although Black Nationalism in the Caribbean was primarily aimed at enhancing the social and political consciousness of the black masses in which they were empowered to re-construct themselves, their identities, their communities and their nations through pride and celebration of native culture, there were evident problems with black self-rule in the Caribbean.

The problems associated with black-self-rule in the Caribbean were inevitable because independence has lost its sheen whereby it was a façade of the continuity of racial and class inequalities, exploitation and oppression of the masses by the new, managerial elite who were deeply grounded in a colonial mentality and colonial values assimilated from the metropole. Most modern nations of the Caribbean only gained "flag independence" and hence, Black Nationalism played a pivotal role in which it attempted to open the eyes of the black masses that were politically socialized into a false consciousness that de-colonization

and independence have helped to fully disintegrate the mechanized systems of imperialism and colonialism.

Firstly, before one can carefully evaluate and deftly analyze the problems with black self-rule in the Caribbean, one has to clearly define and discuss the thematic relevance of Caribbean Black Nationalism as a critical political ideology and as a movement in Caribbean history. In the article, 'The Rise of Garvey and Black Nationalism' (2012), the Mapping the African-American Past website defined Black Nationalism as,

“An ideology and movement which encouraged black pride, political and economic independence and the unity of all people of African descent in which black people would have celebrated their native culture and contribution of outstanding, black leaders and heroes.”

Therefore, based on the Mapping the African-American website's definition, one can now contextualize black nationalism in the Caribbean whereby critical questions have to be posed to stimulate discussion of the topic throughout the essay. Why was political and economic independence needed for all people of African descent especially Caribbean people? how would unity help the people of African descent in the Caribbean and how effective was black nationalism as an instrument in helping to liberate the minds and souls of the black masses in the Caribbean, who were still affected by the residual effects of servitude and colonization?

The black masses in the Caribbean needed political and economic independence in order to fully remove colonial structures and the oppressive nature of the white supremacist system. To substantiate the following statement, evidence can be cited from the short essay, 'Black Struggle in Colonization' in which Eric Flanagan (2010) argues,

“Although slavery may be abolished in all parts of Europe and America, the people of Africa and their descendants elsewhere are still enslaved by the values and memories of white oppression. They face oppression every day, politically, economically and socially that are still griming reminders of enslavement of their people not long ago” (p.1).

Flanagan's statement validates the fact that there was a continuity of exploitation and dehumanization among people of African descent because the institutionalized system of colonization and white supremacy relegated the black masses to inferior positions in which they aren't seen to possess extra-ordinary capabilities to acquire self-reliance, self-determination and independence in a context where political rule can promulgate a sense of equality, social justice and the restoration of humanity through good governance and effective leadership by black leaders.

In addition, economic independence of the black masses should have entailed limited dependence on the metropolitan powers in which blacks should be a formidable force in generating and controlling wealth through self-reliance and production of goods and services that could build sustainable, vibrant economies. As a result, nationalists and political philosophers like Marcus Garvey used black nationalism as a powerful tool to disseminate and inculcate the different aspects of independence in the minds of the black masses of the Caribbean, in an effort to unite them towards the common goal of experiencing real black power. To prove that Garvey envisioned a political, social and economic system in which black people would be dominant forces through self-confidence,

evidence can be drawn from the short essay entitled, 'Black Nationalism and the Call for Black Power' in which Professor Andrew P. Smallwood (2012) posits,

"Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) because he believed that black separation would be the best chance for black people to realize their fullest potential as human beings culturally, socially, politically and economically."
"Garvey clearly used education in the form of programs and newspapers to teach Black people about economic and social upliftment through collective action. Garvey's socio-political philosophy of Black Nationalism, expressed in the UNIA, emphasized cultural pride, social separation and economic empowerment" (pp.2-3).

In Professor Smallwood's argument, one can safely conclude that black nationalism catapulted education as a significant foundation and instrument to inspire and empower blacks into experiencing a new stream of consciousness in which they could successfully challenge the white supremacist system with an infiltration of a new epistemology framework obtained through Black Nationalism. Nevertheless, black nationalism in relation to black self-rule posed serious challenges for the Caribbean and its people. The challenge with black nationalism in relation to black self-rule in the Caribbean is that the main proponents of this branch of radical political thought had meticulously incorporated European values and ideas when formulating this ideology and movement. As a result, the black self-rule in which they had envisioned can only be a figment of their imagination and an unsuccessful experiment in the Caribbean because the Caribbean had no native political thought but rather adaptation of European political thought and the white supremacist system is still deeply embedded in all the major fabrics of society whether past or present.

To reinforce the premise of the following arguments, authoritative statements can be cited from the academic journal article, 'Investigating the Radical Caribbean Intellectual Tradition' where Anthony Bogues (1998) declares:

"Nobody on the bridge inquires about the tools needed to fix bridge nor why it was incomplete in the first place... the absence of a critical and radical thought in the Caribbean is a matter of grave concern. But they were never trained to look at the Caribbean through Caribbean eyes" (p.30).

These strong declarative arguments which Bogues postulates, symbolically represent the futile position of the Caribbean that lacks a native sheen of enlightenment to the masses due to the fact those key proponents of black nationalism were not grounded from native perspective but rather, they assimilated and adapted European values, norms and ideas to solve a 'black problem'. This is in itself is a primary indicator of the problem with black self-rule because the supposed "black liberators of the black, oppressed peoples of the Caribbean" still look outside to metropolitan centres for solutions and tools to repair the futility of the Caribbean's position.

To further the discussion with locating black nationalism in relation to black self-rule, more supporting arguments of the plausible clause can be drawn from Paget Henry and Hilbourne A. Watson. In the academic journal article, 'Philosophy and the Caribbean Intellectual Tradition' in which Paget Henry extrapolates:

"Given the prominence of Edward Blyden, Marcus Garvey and other Caribbean scholars in this growth of Africana philosophy, the late entry of the Caribbean is both striking and worthy of consideration... Edward Blyden was a major nineteenth century theorist of

black liberation.. He became the most important proponent of African nationalism as a solution to European colonialism and domination. Although progressive in central thrusts, Blyden's early thought showed embarrassing positions that contradicted African nationalist thrusts... He advocated for the elimination of traditional African religions and languages and their replacement by Christianity and European languages" (pp. 5&12).

Hence, Henry's discussion reveals and highlights the core weaknesses of black nationalism where the outlined objectives of celebration of black pride and dismantling European domination over the black race are actually self-defeating. The objectives of black nationalism and the expected outcomes are self-defeating because main proponents as demonstrated in the example of Blyden failed to create and develop programmes and initiatives that could actually challenge the status quo by replacing the colonial, social and economic structures with transformative ones that would have truly empowered the minds of black people to achieve their fullest potential. Instead of transforming and challenging the existing system of oppression and exploitation, Blyden succumbed to the expectations of the colonial masters in which he used their weapons of undermining the black masses and re-gurgitating their modus operandi towards the black race. Thus, Henry's critique of black nationalism acts as an eye opener to the early failures or challenges experienced by black self-rule in the Caribbean.

Moreover, although Garvey explicitly stated in his 'Dream of the Negro Empire'," he hopes to build up Africa in the interest of the black race in which Africa will hone black people of African descent from America and the West Indies together so that, Africa will one day be colonized by the black race" (Garvey, 1922: *The Negro World*), Garvey also followed and accepted the colonialist agenda like Blyden in which aimed to christianize the people of African descent through his teachings and principles in the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). This statement can be validated by the qualitative findings presented by Paget Henry (1998) in the academic journal article, 'Philosophy and the Caribbean Intellectual Tradition' in which he argues:

"Like the early Blyden, Garvey's discourse on the human was exclusively Christian. There was no room in Garvey's racial historicism for exchanges between philosophical anthropologies of Africa, Islam and the Christian West... Thus, the Christianizing of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans was an important founding principle of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)" (p.13).

Again, one is able to see the adaptation and integration of European norms, values and beliefs into socializing people of African descent from the Caribbean because the early proponents of black liberation failed to accept and see themselves from the perspective of being a Caribbean. It also demonstrates that in order to acquire the status of being a human while being black one had to take on a European concept of identity and this is evident in the removal of African and the replacement of Christianity to redeem the descendants of Africans who were still viewed as inferior and uncivilized. Consequently, Christianity was used as a force by these proponents of black nationalism and liberation, to control an untamed, black people.

Furthermore, problems with black self-rule in the Caribbean can be located in Garvey's racial ideology of accepting capitalism as an economic system for advancing the interests of the black race. This argument has been confirmed in the journal of Comparative theory entitled, 'Raciology, Garveyism and the Limits of Black Nationalism in the Caribbean

Diaspora' in which Hilbourne A. Watson (2008) states:

“West Indian nationalists did not broadly question capitalism and the class relations of exploitation on which it rested. In the end, the nationalist movement left the struggle for independence with major deficits... the nationalists never managed to see a way beyond capitalism... the stance of nationalists failed to benefit the black, working classes in any fundamental way... Marcus Garvey and Garveyism drew on ideological currents that had already germinated in Europe, the United States and the colonial world... Garvey viewed capitalism as the proper model of development for Africa and the African diaspora. He saw capitalism as a modernizing force for upliftment of people from Africa and of African descent around the world” (pp.85&89).

It has already been established and re-iterated that Garvey's ideology on race largely drew from European influences but the task is to now critically evaluate and analyze his proposition of capitalism in relation to problems with black self-rule in the Caribbean.

In the 'Finance and Development' journal of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) website, chief economists, Sarwat Jahan and Ahmed Saber Mahud (2015) define capitalism as “an economic system in which private actors own and control property, production and distribution of good services through limited government intervention and in their own best interests to generate profits and not social goods.” Therefore, based on the definition of capitalism given, a crucial question must be posed to stimulate analysis in the discussion, if capitalism suits the best interests of private actors who are not usually the black, working classes, how will it fundamentally assist in advancing their welfare? Capitalism is the ideology of the colonialists who own, control and concentrate wealth in the hands of the elite, few like themselves so Garvey advocating for capitalism as tool for advancement for black people in and of itself, is a pipeline dream and an evil fallacy. It is an evil fallacy because capitalism perpetuates the colonial agenda of strictly socially stratified societies in which there is gross social inequalities and poverty that affects the black, masses who are exploited by the brown, middle and upper classes who concentrate wealth and power. As a result, capitalism as a political ideology and an economic system, has been translated into Caribbean politics during the de-colonization and independence periods and this, reveals the core failures of black self-rule in the Caribbean.

The problem with black self-rule in the Caribbean is that the brown middle classes did not have a transformative agenda in their minds to uplift the lives of the down-trodden, black masses who needed empowerment and a re-construction of their identities that was shattered by the psychological infiltration of European conceptualization of self and being human. Instead, the brown upper and middle classes wore the robes of the European colonizers in which independence bestowed access to enormous social privileges based on class and educational attainment. This is validated in the text, 'Caribbean Political Thought: Theories of the Post-Colonial State' in which Dr. Aaron Kamugisha (2013) integrates a short essay entitled, 'The West Indian Middle Classes' where C.L.R. James blatantly argues:

“for generations their sole aim in life was to be admitted to the positions to which their talents and education entitled them, when they did enter the charmed government circles and big businesses, they showed their best that they could be good servants of the Colonial Office.. they actually did little.. The excitement of the politicians about independence must not be trusted. In recent years, the middle classes were not concerned about independence. They were quite satisfied with lives they lived... Government jobs allow them the possibility of accumulating material goods and wealth..

Read their speeches about the society in which they live. They have nothing to say.” (pp. 252-255).

C.L.R. James’ argument on the middle classes of the West Indies and the nature of their politics is a stark reality of the serious social polarization between upper, middle and lower classes in the post-independence era of the Caribbean in which those who were afforded access to luxurious social privileges based on class and employment options never really cared about the suffering and the pain of the black, masses from the lower classes.

This also mirrors the problems with independence wherein black self-rule was another episode of a false consciousness in which the masses were conned into the propaganda that independence would have offered liberation from foreign control and new stream of consciousness that would lead to black empowerment. Instead, independence became a fiction story, a story of liberation that was imagined but never came to full fruition because the political leaders and other members of the middle classes have failed to integrate other social groups to complete the process of transformation. Capitalism lies at the centre of the black self-rule ideology in which it promotes competition and selfishness where self-interests are more important than social good. As a result, the black power movement in the 1960s with its central figure Dr. Walter Rodney amongst many others who arose to challenge the status quo along the lines of class relations in an effort to overthrow the neo-colonial structures and replace it with more egalitarian structures through a revolution.

Dr. Walter Rodney and other radical members of the intelligentsia harshly criticized the status of independence in the Caribbean as flag independence where there was partial, political and constitutional sovereignty but colonialism was never officially removed from the political, economic, social and cultural structures and systems. Black power emerged as social movement in which the black masses were empowered through education and black history to chart a personal and collective path to true freedom but the neo-colonial government implemented measures to suppress the growth of the movement citing it as a “dangerous threat”. Anthony Bogues (2009) in his ‘Black Power, De-colonization and Caribbean Politics: Walter Rodney and Grounding With My Brothers’ states,

“colonial power had constructed a sense of rule in which local sovereignty was absent. Thus, the apparent incongruity of a black police officer beating a black young boy while cursing Black Power” (p.2).

The scenario of a black police officer beating a black boy for attending Black Power classes in Trench Town after Jamaica had gained independence proved that the colonial agenda was still embedded in every fabric of the society and the government used the police as force of intimidation and control to oppress and hurt the working poor and the lower classes who were mostly black people. In addition, the scenario highlighted by Bogues shows us the momentum that the black power movement was gaining in Jamaica that allowed the newly installed government to dispatch police officers to humiliate the black masses especially Rastafarians who were engaged in the classes and actively involved in this means of political and social protest.



Demonstrating students of The University of the West Indies with one of the many placards they carried on October 16, 1968. (Source: [Jamaica Gleaner](#))

Bogues (2009) continued in his academic journal where he asserts that the revoking of Rodney's licence to work in Jamaica led to the Rodney riots in 1968 but the Jamaican government the (JLP) under the leadership of Prime Minister, Hugh Lawson-Shearer undermined the riots that were spearheaded by University of the West Indies students and by extension the black poor from Kingston who felt oppressed and excluded from the system. He further commented that Hugh Lawson Shearer referred to the Rodney riots as a "Castro-type revolution in Jamaica." Walter Rodney as a Caribbean intellectual from Guyana did not limit his studies of History and African Studies to the classroom borders where he delivered lectures to students, he was heavily influenced by Marxism, which is a political ideology developed by Karl Marx which looks at the exploitative nature of capitalism in which the bourgeoisie (capital owners) oppressed the proletariat (working classes) but as soon as the proletariat recognizes they are socialized into a false consciousness, they will unite in an effort to overthrow the bourgeoisie to chart a classless system in which the ownership of property and capital becomes public. Through the influence of Marxism, Rodney saw colonialism and neo-colonialism in Jamaica and by extension the Caribbean along the lines of class relations in which upper and middle class concentrated most of the wealth and power in their hands while leaving the working classes and the poor to live under severe socio-economic conditions. Hence, the reason Rodney spent most of his time "grounding" with this specific social group of persons because he recognized that the most powerful tools to enlighten the black masses were education to inform them of their past and present and violence to overthrow the neo-colonial regime. The Jamaican government fiercely opposed this because it threatened their status and power whereby the masses when united, could have overthrown them. Now, one can see the importance of black unity especially under the conditions of continued, imposed mechanisms of control over personal and collective freedom.



Walter Rodney demonstrators marching down King Street in the vicinity of the Supreme Court buildings heading for Harbour Street, where they held a meeting in front of The Daily Gleaner building on October 16, 1968. (Source: [Jamaica Gleaner](#))

The reason the working classes and the black underclasses turned to riots, it is because independence in and of itself was not fought for in Jamaica through violence but was given to ceremonially by Britain. To support the thesis, radical arguments brought forward by Louis Lindsay (1975) in his seminal piece, 'Myths of Independence: Middle Class Politics and Non-Mobilization in Jamaica' where he rightfully asserts,

“ a national flag is designed and unfurled. So too is a national anthem, and perhaps a national dish, a national tree, a national bird and so on. 2 But for the great majority of citizens in the alleged newly independent state, life continues in much the way that it did before what was heralded as independence was achieved.”

He further went to argue,

“Jamaica can be used as a perfect case study of how myths and symbols associated with independence have manipulated the general political quietism and the frustrating possibilities of transformation in the Third World. He integrates Fanon’s theory on pseudo-independence where Fanon declares, “where there has been no genuine mobilization for self-determination, the colonial situation will continue and it will do so virtually unaffected by declarations of legal or pseudo-independence”.

Therefore, based on Fanon’s theory of pseudo-independence and Lindsay’s radical arguments about independence as a myth, one can now have a comprehensive grasp of the motivations behind Rodney trying to unite the black masses through re-educating and re-socializing them from the false consciousness to protest against white supremacy but more so, the lower classes being exploited and being voiceless by the upper and middle classes who perpetuated the colonial agenda. Violence or riots in the context of the post-independent Caribbean should not take on completely negative connotations per se but to be seen as tool of “self-purging” from the physical and psychological chains that persisted since colonialism. Violence or riots should also be seen as the black people’s expression of

frustration and disillusionment with the system of oppression and exploitation but such expressions will be put down by the government because it threatens their self-interest.

Rodney's contribution to radical intellectual tradition was the true sense of black nationalism through the black power movement but the Abeng movement in the 1960s up to the 1970s must also be integrated in the discussion of the essay on black nationalism and how it helped to address the problems with black self-rule in the Caribbean. The Abeng movement like Rodney's black power movement was one in which sought to address to social inequalities, injustices and humiliation of the black poor and working classes who were being oppressed by the neo-colonial system. It acted as an eye-opener and 'consciousness awakener' through radical thought, writings and proclamation. Hence, the use of the abeng. In the short essay 'Learning to Blow the Abeng: A Critical Look at Anti-Establishments Movements of the 1960s and 1970s' that was found in the text 'Caribbean Political Thought: Theories of the Post-Colonial State by Dr. Aaron Kamugisha (2013), Rupert Lewis asserts,

"Abeng in 1969 was the coming together of a variety of trends- Rastafarians, Garveyites, businessmen, lawyers, cartoonists, UWI academics and disillusioned PNP grassroots activists. One of the requirements of the Abeng group was to go out into different parts of the country to sell weekly newspapers, get political feedback and build a network of support... Haile Selassie's visit to Jamaica gave Rastafarians a sense of legitimacy" (p.249-250).

Based on Lewis' assertion another social movement that promoted black nationalism in attempts to address problems with black self-rule, one can gather that Rastafarians had played a central role in black nationalism where Rastafarians were increasingly aware of black subjugation under a system of white supremacy and colonialism. In addition, Rastafarians like other black social groups in post-independence Jamaica were severely mistreated by the government because of the agitation they executed in protests against the evils of the new political system, hence the reason, Haile's Selassie visit was so significant to them and by extension, other grassroots groups. One outstanding Rastafarian, aside from Bob Marley during this period was Planno who wrote radical articles to the Jamaican press and poem revolving around the events of the Rodney riots.

On the other hand, the Abeng movement and its radical writings and distribution in Jamaica and the Black Power Movement by Rodney helped to inspire the outbreak of the Trinidadian Revolution in 1970 in which there was violence to legitimize the status of the masses who felt sub-human based on the notions of racial prejudice and the stark realities of Caribbean life since independence has been granted. Rupert Lewis described the Trinidadian Revolution as "the scene of the English-Speaking Caribbean only guerrilla movement in National Union of Freedom Fighters (NUFF) where Trinidadian radicalism encouraged the electoral involvement of the New Jewel Movement (NJM) in Grenada" (p.453). The examples of radical social movements in Jamaica stimulated a chain effect in other Caribbean countries which sought to defeat the anti-imperialist agenda by toppling neo-colonial regime and governments that oppressed not only black people but the majority by dividing them along class and racial lines.

In concluding, different brands of black nationalism in the Caribbean during the de-colonization and post-independence period were geared at uplifting the souls and minds of the majority who were oppressed under white supremacy and imperialism. However, the problem with black self-rule in the Caribbean is that the new elite did not have progressive agenda in mind to uplift their fellow brothers and sisters but rather to exercise domination

over their personal and collective freedom based on luxurious social privileges afforded to them.

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