

Rastafari, the Liminal and the Transhistorical, Politics, and the Concept of Man

Recently, I had a very fruitful conversation with a Rastafari brethren of mine. Strangely, the conversation was centered on the subject of "Rastafari vis-à-vis Politics". This rarely does happen, and when ever it happens it is dismissed with a certain immediacy. But it wasn't so in our case. Both parties saw the reasoning as an opportunity to move beyond the simple repetition of traditional and fundamental principles that have engulfed Rastafari globally. Both parties also knew that action without rigorous clarification and development of ideas can produce results diametrically opposite to what is desired and required.

While my brethren was holding to the traditional views of Rastafari *bun* politics, and trust me, he had some of the most sensible and lucid reasoning I ever heard against Rastafari political involvement, I was insistent that Rastafari cannot afford to shirk our political responsibilities. My insistence prompted the brethren to ask me a question I cannot remember being asked before though I had engaged many Rastafarians on the subject of Rastafari and Politics before. I found the brethrens question as indicative of his deep comprehension of the dynamics of reasoning. The brethren asked me "Why am I so insistent on Rastafari political involvement?". The response I gave elicited a kind of confused look on the brethren's face. I could see he was immediately struck by the seeming antimony of my position, but I must admit I was also struck by the depth and clarity of the brethren's position. Owing to this fact I will relate both positions below, first the traditional view held by the brethren followed by the paradoxical (the brethren's term) view held by me.

The traditional view holds that the man is the highest of Kedamawi Haile Selassie's creation, being so he is only supposed to be subject to HIM his creator. Therefore, for man to live as man there must be a dissolution of all institutions that enslave man. These institutions are as listed below.

Politics
Economics
Religion

One Rastafari Elder referred to them as the three unclean spirits.

Politics is supposed to be concerned with the 'management of man'. Some would argue that it is not man *per se* that is managed but society. Some would also counter that society is man in the collective. So any way we twist it and turn it, politics is supposed to be concerned with the 'management of man'.

Politics is built on the shaky foundation that man, in the absence of political institution, is incapable of self management and living in accord with certain social and moral laws. This view gives a rather degenerative view of Man. But Rastafari has a redemptive view of Man. Rastafari sees Man as gods which possess the potential and the will to live in full

accord with the categorical will of the Almighty. Rastafari sees certain institutions, in an historical sense, not as instruments in this regard but as impediments. The following excerpt from Marcus Garvey gives confirmation to the Rastafari view of Man.

"man is the supreme lord of creation, that in man lies the power of mastery, *a mastery of self*, a mastery of all things created, bowing only to the almighty Architect in those things that are spiritual." (The emphasis is mine)

The Rastafari conception of man is antithetical to having any political institutions as lord over man. Therefore political institutions which makes men slave, in a literal and metaphorically sense, must inevitably crumble.

Economics is supposedly concerned with the 'management of things' as opposed to the 'management of man'. A cursory glance at this simplified definition would take one to the erroneous conclusion that because economics deals with the management of things as opposed to the management of man and that things do need management, it is not as harmful as politics and therefore not in the way of Rastafari accomplishing its redemptive mission. However, a deeper delving into the study of the historical development of economics would reveal some startling, frightening, gruesome realities. The revelation of which, from a Rastafari perspective, would require a very lengthy and detailed treatment. Such a treatment would be forthcoming in the not too distant future but for now I'll deal with some basic manifestations of the gruesomeness of economics.

As been said before, economics and its area of concern 'the management of things' would seem harmless *prima facie*, because the word 'things' could be readily interpreted as inanimate things like commodities. No one would ever think that 'things' also refer to man and his labor. In economics, man is reduced to a thing. In politics, it is not even his entire humanity that is taken away but his divinity. But in economics both his humanity and his divinity are stripped from him and man is reduced to a mere 'thing'. The reality of Chattel Slavery gave such a graphic demonstration of this dehumanization of man that it really needs no more demonstration.

Many are under the impression that the insidious system of economics, demonstrated during the period of the African holocaust (the genesis of modern day capitalism) has died with the death of chattel slavery. The reality is, it has not. It still continues under modern capitalism which is seen today by many as the classic economic paradigm.

Capitalism has reduced man to beast and replaced the moral law with the law of the jungle. Capitalism is akin to Nazism. In fact, Nazism and Capitalism are so identical that it is impossible to find any grounds upon which one could accept one and at the same time reject the other. Both are influenced by Darwin's theory of Evolution and Herbert Spencer's Social Darwinism. Both are based on the doctrine of struggle and ruthless competition and the survival of the fittest. Both are bitter enemies of the concept of egalitarianism express by the Rastafari concept of 'InI'; Nazism believes in a superior race and Capitalism believes in a superior class. It is interesting to note that in 'Mein Kampf', Hitler used the taxonomy that exists in Capitalism to compare with and justify his theory of the inequality of humanity. The renowned Social Scientist, Max Weber, in his book

'The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism' and in his recognition that capitalism depends on an exploited class, stated

"Of course the presence of a surplus population which it can hire cheaply in the labour market is a necessity for the development of Capitalism."

No less a person than John D. Rockefeller speaking on Capitalism stated that "The growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest, the working out of the law of nature." (the law of nature, as used in this quote, is a euphemism for the law of the jungle)

Both subscribes to the theory of natural selection.

The reification of existence under Capitalism, which transforms humans into objects of production and exploitation found its most grotesque expression in the African Holocaust.

Religion supposedly plays the role of management of man's conscience. Of all the valid arguments posited in defense of the brother's iconoclastic tearing down of religion, none is more worthy of repetition than the following excerpts by Kedamawi Haile Selassie and Karl Marx.

"We must stop confusing religion and spirituality. Religion is a set of rules, regulations and rituals created by humans, which were supposed to help people grow spiritually. Due to human imperfection, religion has become corrupt, political, divisive, and a tool for power struggle." Kedamawi Haile Selassie

"The social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling and an oppressed class, and all they have to offer to the latter is the pious wish that the former may be charitable. The social principle of Christianity transfer the reparation of all infamies to the realm of heaven and thus justify the perpetuation of these infamies on earth. 'The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-abasement, resignation, submission and humility-in short all the characteristics of the canaille.'" Karl Marx

Though Marx dealt specifically with Christianity, This is true of most other religions. Owing to this fact, under the pretense of guiding man's conscience, religion is actually submitting man to the same subjugation of which economics and politics are guilty.

I must make known at this point that the brother's reasoning was substantiated by a lot of ostensibly valid historical proofs and convincing anecdotes. I, however, simply extracted and reproduced here the basic hypothesis.

After the brethren had finished articulating his position, he was amused, maybe taken aback, by the fact that I had agreed with him, though InI started from a position of disagreement. I reiterated my earlier stance that Rastafari should become political active and organized and at the same time I voiced my agreement with his above stance. The obvious question then is "How can I reconcile the two arguments?"

First of all, the brethren wasn't cognizant of the fact that we were discussing two different, though not mutually exclusive, philosophical trends within Rastafari, viz. Rastafari the particular and Rastafari the universal; Rastafari as a liminal experience

and Rastafari as a transhistorical experience. While I was speaking about a Rastafari that was rooted in an actual historical experience, the brother's version of Rastafari transcended history. While I was speaking about a Rastafari that emerged as a response to the atrocities of slavery, colonialism and the dehumanization of the African man, the brethren was speaking about a Rastafari that preceded slavery and the dehumanizing experience of Africa and Africans. The liminal trend's main area of concern has to do with the reclamation of African dignity and pride. This entails political power, economic independence, a social ethic that balances the social and the individual, and a spirituality free from euro-centric influences. Consequently, it presupposes the advancement of the struggle on all fronts- political, economic, social, and spiritual.

The transhistorical trend on the other hand is primarily concerned with good over evil on a universal scale. In many cases, it fails to see the particularity of the African redemption struggle as a necessary pre-requisite, thus falling prey to crass millenarianism. The brethren attempts to bring about holistic health without diagnosing and treating the particular illnesses, though he accused me of preferring convalescence to perfect health..

The line that delineates the two trends, though distinctive, it could be easily obfuscated. Therefore it is the duty of those within the Rastafari Movement who are equipped or blessed with the requisite perspicacity to both identify and isolate these two trends when ever necessary. For, inevitably, confusion of thought leads to confusion of action.

While I was endeavoring, with meticulous care, to shed some light on this duality within Rastafari philosophy, I was immediately struck with the reason for the negative responses to Rastafari carrying our struggle on the political front. The negatives responses arise out of a confusing of the two philosophical trends within Rastafari.

I then took the opportunity to explain that although I know that the time will come when there will be no need for politics and political authority and do look forward for the reign of the Moral Theocracy of Kadamawi Haile Selassie, I am also convinced that Rastafari role in bringing about such ideal state is an active role not a passive one. It would be one of the gravest errors of the history of Rastafari to think that the transition from the present state into the ideal state would happen automatically and all that is required of InI is passive submission to the inevitable. InI active role as Rastafari entails strategically positioning ourselves to influence the changes necessary. Changes don't occur by mere wishes or prayerful pleading, according to HIM but by carefully directed and calculated actions and strategies.

In spite of my ablest efforts the brother failed to see the logic in my dialectic. He was adamant that nothing will be accomplished by Rastafari, as a separate group of people, pursuing economic and political power. 'It would be an affirmation of everything that InI stands against as Rastafari', he remarked. 'It would be endeavoring to I-stablish a new moral order on the infrastructure of the old; its like making new wine with old wine skin'. At this point, in spite of all effort at refrain, I was forced to laugh. This outburst of course offended the Brethren who was passionately defending his position that he evidently has put a lot of thought into. Realising I erred, I however had to highlight to him the reason

for my outburst. I highlighted to him that he just did something that he was passionately against. With the use of the word 'I-stablished', the brethren has removed the 'e' from an English word, replaced it with an 'I' another English letter and accepts that it is a Rastafari word. Therefore he has built a new 'Rastafari Language' on the base of the old English language. I used the opportunity to point out the intellectual idleness in such an act and how such idleness even causes us to modify the name of the Emperor though such act is against the highest protocols of Ethiopia . We thereafter got into reasoning on the role of language in the establishing of the New Moral Order. I will email this part of the discussion at sometime in the future. However it is relevant for me to make it known that, after agreeing that the importance of language is misplaced in a culture that theoretically values the 'Word', the brethren recognizes that such use of language is temporary and transitory. At this point, the idea of transition and liminality became clear to the brethren. It was only when the discussion shifted from politics to lexicology that the brethren understood the ideas I was using to substantiate my political stance, thus giving life to the saying that 'Nothing is understood in isolation'.

Some reason why politics is important to the Rastafari struggle

- Though in order to simplify its definition and to make his point, the brother gave the definition of politics as the management of man, Proudhon, a French philosopher of the 1800's gave its definition as the 'science of liberty'. Proudhon's definition makes it more urgent that InI should seek some form of political power, because whosoever controls this science controls the liberty of man.
- Consistency in words and deeds is one of the highest responsibilities of Rastafari. But our traditional stance on the subject of politics reveals a glaring inconsistency in our words and deed. For instance, we shy away from politics because we see the practice of politics in the west as expressive of Babylon system. In words we declare non-recognition of the authority of Babylon and Babylonian leaders but in deed, If we want to set up an organization we send in papers for approval by the relevant state agency, if we want piece of land we apply through the state mechanism and pay for lease or ownership, we rally for respect to be accorded to our religious rights to use marijuana as a sacrament (religious liberties are enshrined in state constitution), we never gave up our citizenship to our respective countries. All these acts are indicative of, not a rejection but, an acceptance of National authority.
- In 1966 when Kdamawi Haile Selassie visited Jamaica he extended to the Jamaican parliament an official invitation to become a part of the OAU. This invitation was never accepted by the baldhead Government of Jamaica. Five years prior Ras Sam Brown demonstrated a high degree of political consciousness and formed his political movement. Had the wider Jamaican Rastafari community shared his vision, maybe InI could have garnered enough votes to earn a seat in parliament. InI could have then used this seat to pressure the then government to accept the invitation by Kdamawi Haile Selassie. Forty years later InI are now

lobbying the AU for something that has been handed to us on a silver platter. Because of lack of political consciousness then, InI now have to exercise political salvage because InI failed to demonstrate political ingenuity and foresight in 1961. Will InI go on learning by trial and error?

- All the decisions that affect InI daily life are made by those with political power. Because of a lack of will to political power InI have relegated ourselves to mendicants, begging our rights from people who InI have already identified as enemies to our cause.
- By abdicating our political responsibilities, InI are playing into the hands of the architects of the New World Order whose aim is to wrestle political authority from everyone and concentrate it into the hands of the anti-christ. So InI are giving away InI political claims and power on a silver platter to our arch-enemies.
- At some point in our struggle, InI will need an anchor nation to lend political, economic and other support to the furtherance of InI Struggle in the same way as USSR served as an anchor for Communism; America for capitalism/imperialism; Israel for Judaism; Arab countries for Islam. This was the intent of Marcus Garvey via his repatriation program. He needed to build that anchor nation in Africa . However, for Rastafari, InI see this could more realistically manifest itself in Jamaica .
- Forbes Burnham grew up in Guyana in the era of colonialism and had first hand experience of some of wretchedness of the colonial system. Seeing himself some day as an agent of change, he went to school, educated himself, earned scholarship achieve his LLb in Law and came back to Guyana and became actively involve in politics in Guyana. Because of his political ingenuity, he had achieved the highest position for himself in Guyana . First Prime Minister, then Executive President. By virtue of his position, he could have changed the political, social and economic situation in Guyana . He introduced Co-operativism as a socio-economic model in Guyana . He made education free from nursery to University. He initiated a lot of self-help and community initiatives. He gave land to the tiller (Rastafarians got Norfork and RasVille). He emphasized the importance of agriculture to the development and self-sufficiency of our young nation. He taught the nation to produce our own and don't be dependent on the capitalist nations. Most of these reforms, or revolutions, have a Rastafari ring to them. So I would venture to say he established the ideological foundation of Rastafari in Guyana. He even declared that Rastafari will take his place when he's gone. When Rastafari came on the scene in Guyana , we were radically idealistic in our ideology and in our praxis. We attempted to apply the Rastafari social ethic of 'InI' in its absolute state to the livity of Rastafari in Guyana . The presence of our idealism was as acute as our lack of political realism. InI attempted to usher in the ideal state without regard to the existing political and socio-economic realities and obstacles of the time. 30-40 years after, today, many of these undertakings have been reversed. While InI have maintained the idealist vision, InI are now more conscious of the fact that to achieve that ideal state InI must address and confront the existing mechanisms that are acting as impediments. InI have learnt that to some degree 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their

existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.' Karl Marx

When Forbes Burnham died in 1985, to the disappointment of the African Guyanese cause, Rastafari didn't take his place. But he was replaced by someone that had seized the opportunity to radically reverse all of his socio-economic programs and sold the country out to the international capitalists. Rastafarians, just as any other citizen, are feeling the brunt of this capitalist takeover.

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