

HARLEM RENAISSANCE THEN AND BLACK LIVES MATTER TODAY: EXPLORING SOME AFRICAN AMERICANS' STRUGGLES

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Abstract: From the first organized black slaves rebellions through the Underground Railroad, up to the current Black Lives Matter movement, the struggles of African Americans have become more visible. This article discusses the African Americans' struggles from Harlem Renaissance to the emergence of recent Black Lives Matter movement, to highlight their unrest and precarious conditions that require constant reflections. It specifically sustains that; if African Americans are still struggling (for basic rights) it may imply that some fundamental attempts to ensure them happiness may have failed. The still issue of black uncured wound is raised here to investigate some unaccomplished promises of Harlem Renaissance which have required the emergence of Black Lives Matter movement. Constricted in the Social Movements theory, this article first defines Harlem Renaissance and Black Lives Matter as some forms of African Americans' struggles for social equality. It furthermore investigates some unsatisfactory achievements of Harlem Renaissance that led to the emergence of other forms of black protests including Black Lives Matter movement.

Keywords: Harlem Renaissance, Black Lives Matter, black struggle, Social Movements theory.

HARLEM RENAISSANCE D'ALORS ET BLACK LIVES MATTER D'AUJOURD'HUI : EXPLORATION DE CERTAINES LUTTES AFRO-AMERICAINES

Résumé : Depuis les premières rébellions organisées d'esclaves noirs, en passant par le chemin de fer clandestin, jusqu'à l'actuel mouvement *Black Lives Matter*, les luttes des Afro-Américains sont devenues plus visibles. Cet article examine les luttes des Afro-Américains depuis la Renaissance de Harlem jusqu'à l'émergence du récent mouvement Black Lives Matter, afin de mettre en évidence leur agitation et leurs conditions précaires qui nécessitent une réflexion constante. Il soutient spécifiquement que si les Afro-Américains luttent encore (pour des droits fondamentaux), cela peut signifier que certaines réalisations fondamentales visant à leur assurer le bonheur ont peut-être échoué. La question de la blessure non soignée des Noirs est soulevée ici pour étudier certaines promesses non tenues de la Renaissance de Harlem qui ont nécessité l'émergence du mouvement *Black Lives Matter*. S'inscrivant dans la théorie des mouvements sociaux, cet article définit d'abord la Renaissance de Harlem et *Black Lives Matter* comme des formes de lutte des Afro-Américains pour l'égalité sociale. Il étudie ensuite certaines réalisations insatisfaisantes de la Renaissance de Harlem qui ont conduit à l'émergence d'autres formes de protestations noires, dont le mouvement Black Lives Matter.

Mots-clés: Harlem Renaissance, Black Lives Matter, lutte des Noirs, théorie des mouvements sociaux.

Introduction

Protest among people of African descent is not a new discourse; it started when black people became subjugated to all forms of servitude and then relegated to the second order. Throughout the history of humanity, black protests have been variously shaped with specific contexts. From African slaves' rebellions in the Americas, passing through racial tribulations of post slavery era, up to the resistance to the colonization in Africa and current manifestations against racism, Black Lives Matter movement finds place in the large discourse of Blacks' resistance. Among nations of the world, black people have suffered much regardless any principle of human rights. The race prejudice being backed by "grounded" biblical arguments, has definitely reduced the black race to animal level in front of the whole humanity. This same race prejudice allowed Europeans to enslave black people nearly three hundred years with the entire blessing of the then Catholic hierarchy. By the turn of eighteenth century, serious debates on black slavery aroused in the American decision-making structures and with the support of abolitionists' opinions, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 that freed all black slaves. The aftermath of this era was crucial for the former slaves, since social insertion was not easy to achieve because in the words of Joel Williamson (1984, p. 109) "When the nation freed the slaves, it also freed racism." Following Williamson's views, Sir Alan Burns (1948, p. 16) adds that "The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of darker colour [...] the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they are relegated." From Burns' conclusion stems the core concerns of black people's struggles: they only ask for recognition as full citizens like their white counterparts and nothing else. They too have to enjoy the privileges all Americans are entitled to. From 1920's throughout 1930's, the great Negro renaissance ever organized in the United States of America was held in Harlem in New York City, and this was expected as a movement that will help wipe away African Americans' social predicaments. But as Farshid Nowrouzi Roshnavand argues,

Harlem Renaissance could seldom address the real concerns and desires of African Americans. The reason for this lies in the valorization of the putative exoticism, sensuality and hedonism of Harlem life. This romanticized portrait eclipsed the realities of that time which were completely different from this idealized picture.

Roshnavand (2013, p.48)

Roshnavand argues that, the movement which originally meant to fight and secure equal rights to African Americans fell into worldly levity where relief took precedence over the essential. This article departs from the hypothesis that if there are still forms of black protests and struggles like the recent emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, it probably implies that Harlem Renaissance which was the first African Americans' great and organized form of protest and struggle in the post Civil War America did not fully meet African Americans' expectations. As stated above, the hypothesis needs rigorous investigation in order to understand the unkept promises of Harlem Renaissance that led to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. This research attempts to answer the following questions: If Harlem

Renaissance was the first and greatest black movement, why do African Americans still struggle today against some injustices? Did the Harlem Renaissance's roadmap encompass the expectations of the entire black community? Briefly stated, why does the Black Lives Matter movement emerge today when the Harlem Renaissance was supposed to have won the battle against injustices done to black people?

The main arguments are drawn from readings on African Americans' struggles, mainly Harlem Renaissance and Black Lives Matter, and additional information is collected from any relevant source. From the Social Movements theory that explains "the birth, growth, and maturation of social movements in diverse parts of the planet" (Sen & Avci, 2016, p. 125), this work investigates the nature of African Americans' struggle during Harlem Renaissance in order to understand why they still fight today for nearly the same purpose as formerly.

The pioneers of the Social Movements theory have much pondered on its causes and came to the conclusion that "some social movements are born when certain people or certain groups of people in a society feel that they are deprived of a specific good, service, or resource." (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1988) Obviously, the socio-political context favors the emergence of social movements which become a subject of discourse in the literary field. Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (2006, pp. 20-21) argue that the actors involved in social movements or cultural conflicts promote or oppose social change, and in this perspective, they are linked by strong informal networks and share a distinct collective identity. Obviously, Porta and Diani's views are embedded in African Americans' psyche and the theory then finds relevance to discuss the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Lives Matter movement as social movements that involve African Americans.

In the context of this work, the theory looks at the social ostracism of African Americans as the basic reason of their movements. Besides, the theory enlightens the values of the ideals promoted in the scope of Harlem Renaissance and which did not match with the entire black communities' expectations. It sketches the exclusive aspects of the renaissance which brought about its unsatisfactory outcomes and the emergence of the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement.

This study first defines the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Lives Matter movement as forms of African Americans' struggles, and argues later that Harlem Renaissance did not fundamentally meet the African Americans' expectations, thus the emergence of other forms of black protest including the Black Lives Matter movement.

1. The Harlem Renaissance and the Black Lives Matter Movement as Forms of Black Struggles

1.1 The Harlem Renaissance: an Overview

The Harlem Renaissance was undeniably the greatest turning point in the lives of African Americans. Brought to the urban context through the Great Migration, African Americans' new experiences impacted their entire life and that of the black race all over the world. The northern antislavery setting favored the establishment of the movement. Ella O. Williams (1987, p. 9) explains that "By 1910 the community of Harlem had become a middle-class neighborhood with spacious homes, beautiful churches and thriving businesses. Two-hundred thousand Blacks

who could afford the high rent had moved there, many from the older sections of Manhattan.” Viewed as a promised land where many African Americans converged, Harlem became the cradle of the Negro renaissance. The first Harlem black dwellers were middle-class citizens who were much concerned with issues about lifting up the black race. Claude McKay (1940, p.141), one of the prominent figures of the Negro Movement writes about the ultimate role of this black middle-class community: “The aim of the society was to create in New York a cultural center for promoting research work and collecting literary and historical items on the Negro.” McKay’s views met the movement’s ideals in such a way that he became one of its most influent figures through his writings. Through newspapers like *The Crisis*, *The New York Age*, *The Messenger* which stood as the black herald, the voice of the Negro is heard. Also the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) by W.E.B. Dubois in 1910 “became a common medium for bringing about cooperation between Blacks and Whites in the work of securing and safeguarding the rights of Negro citizens” (Williams, 1987,p. 10). The National Urban League was also founded “to respond to the needs of the increasing number of Blacks who were migrating from the South to the cities” (Williams, 1987, p. 11). The urban black community increased by immigrants rushing from the South. In1920’s, nearly half of the black population of the whole country was living in cities. The outbreak of the First World War which brought many black American soldiers on the European fronts was also a great event that exhumed self-confidence and pride among the black community upon their triumph and return back home. Ella O. Willams observes:

As they marched up Fifth Avenue to the tune of Jim Europe’s ragtime military band, thousands turned out to greet them--mothers, wives and sweethearts. [...] These brave military men returned expecting full citizenship, and Harlem was ready to aid them in their fight. A spirit of defiance in these black soldiers was born that day[...].

Ella O. Willams (1987, pp.16-17)

In Europe, they had fought side by side with white soldiers, and were treated with dignity, hence shaping their opinions on the need to struggle and get rid of any obstacle to their self-fulfillment. From their former experiences in the rural South and the new opportunities in the urban North, African Americans found themselves in a quick growing process of self-rediscovery which represents both the quest for identity and the struggle to achieve their Civil Rights and as results the American Dream.

1.2 The Black Lives Matter Movement

From the European slave trade via the institutionalization of slavery in the Americas black people’s history has much been marked by the horrors including lynching, mob violence, whipping, hanging, police violence etc.. The abolition of slavery, the Civil Rights Movements and the postmodern views on America as a colorless society do not debunk the various theories developed around race prejudice. The outbreak of police harassment on especially black unarmed men in

America in the nearly last ten years greatly worried public opinion and brought about the Black Lives Matter movement, which started from a hashtag on Twitter. In “All Lives Matter, but so Does Race: Black Lives Matter and the Evolving Role of Social Media” Nikita Carney affirms:

The BLM movement began in 2012 when George Zimmerman was acquitted after shooting and killing 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida. Three Black women activists, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, started the movement that subsequently engaged many, including many youth of color, in social justice activism across the country.

Nikita Carney (2016, p.181)

Actually, the shooting and killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and the non-conviction of his white murderer ignited the movement. Tanika Siscoe (2016, p.4) observes that, “There have been numerous protests and riots due to police officers not being indicted for killing unarmed young black men, and with these protests a new social movement was formed that started out as a twitter hashtag that is entitled #BlackLivesMatter.” White police officers’ shooting at unarmed black people is not new and in more of the cases, the murderers are not even charged nor sent to prison. The Black Lives Matter movement, Siscoe (2016, p. 5) carries on “came about after the death of Trayvon Martin and continued to grow with the death of Michael Brown. Both of these young men were black, unarmed, and were shot and killed.” She continues that, the movement “started in response to these deaths and was intended to be a celebration and humanization of black lives” (Siscoe, 2016, p. 5). The most important note to make about these two murders is that, the victims are not armed and the police officers involved in these odious crimes are not indicted. The indignation of the black population is brought to its paroxysm after similar deaths of defenseless black people. Obviously, genocides are grounded by race prejudice allegations that mislead some people to see others as less human, and then unfit to socialization. The movement gained in popularity through various demonstrations in many American cities and worldwide, and toward August 2015, more than thousand demonstrations were held worldwide to call for public awareness on the movement, its purposes and what needs to be done. The Black Lives Matter movement became the twenty first century outcry to denounce a shame that is still rampant (in the country that claims itself the most democratic) since Abraham Lincoln emancipated the black slave, with the imperative duty of the Federal Government to work for his effective social integration.

2. The Harlem Renaissance: a Movement of Black Elite centered more on Cultural Revival than Political Activism

The point in this section argues that, if some black people (especially the lower class) have lived in precarious conditions in spite of the advent of the Harlem Renaissance, it is indubitable that, the renaissance failed to effectively impact their lives in one way or the other. The Harlem Renaissance was much concerned about the black elite than the rest of the African American community whose greater part moved from the South to the North. The major actors of the renaissance, i.e. scholars,

musicians and artists were the elite, or middle class citizens and their ideals and dreams were not forcibly the same as those pursued by the people of the lower class. The elite took the renaissance as an opportunity to assimilate with the white society, thus the movement ignored the masses it was supposed to lift up. Langston Hughes, (1956, p. 1) one of the prominent poets of the time explains: "I'm not a Southerner. I never worked on a levee. I hardly ever saw a cotton field except from a highway." Obviously, this is an expression of self-exclusion from the black common past as well as to the whole project of black political activism. It is arguable that the elite should have addressed the real concerns of the less privileged instead of looking to befriend Whites.

Seemingly, the Harlem Renaissance failed to notice that, a successful revolution should start by addressing the vital concerns of the downtrodden, instead of the inordinate desires of the elite. What can cultural revival mean to a migrant former slave living in slums and insecurity? Carl Wintz (2007, p. 49) proposes a roadmap to the renaissance "A ghetto, a slum, an area blighted by poverty and discrimination. Burned-out storefronts might be fertile ground for political action, but not for art, literature and culture." Wintz stipulates that, in a struggle to achieve equal rights, political activism is the most appropriate approach and not a pursuit of psychological relief manifested in a cultural revival which might mislead people instead of solving their daily problems. Actually, the focus on the redefinition of African American identity, instead of a serious struggle against the oppressor is an inappropriate approach to the black problem, conducted by the Harlem Renaissance. The same idea is expressed by George Lipsitz (2001, p. 120) who postulates that, the black elite should form a single block and fight against the common threat. In a moment of racial violence, security for the oppressed is the key action to take, and the Harlem Renaissance seemed to ignore it. In a context of race riot, lynching, impartial trial, false accusation, and other inhuman treatments, a radical reaction from the victim is the best approach. An attempt to educate the oppressors will come next to let them discover "that other ethnic cultures are just as meaningful and valid as their own" (Banks, 1981, p.242). The black elite may have been misled by their own social position: they do not face injustice and poverty at the same rate as the masses, so they fail to address the real concerns of the largest black population. This is well exhibited in Booker T. Washington's approach to the racial problem. Larry Amin (2007, p.7) observes that "Washington's ideology meant limited economic progress, no claim for social and political rights, and no program for the pursuit of higher education for Blacks." Washington's strategy in uplifting the black race at the post Civil War era was not extended to the claim for political and social rights, which might open them the way to economic progress and higher education. Indeed the degrading living conditions of Blacks in ghettos coupled with white racism should be the first alarming causes of black struggle, but the Harlem Renaissance privileged the fight on a cultural ground, which in my view did not help snatch power from the oppressor and refrain social injustices. I believe that, the healing of the physical trauma must come ahead of the psychological one at the risk of losing the patient's life. Dinesh D' Souza (1995, p.112) observes that especially "A rich country like America should seek to help its most disadvantaged members, not because of what their ancestors

endured, but because they deserve a chance to reach their full potential here and now.” This is pure justice to all Americans and not a favor to African Americans who actually deserve more than being granted equal rights, because their ancestors shared their blood to build that nation. This argument, in line with common sense and the desire of the Founding Fathers to make America a free nation should have been the un-negotiable claims by the black elite during Harlem Renaissance. Unfortunately, the lack of the incisive approach of the renaissance to the black problem aligned with the break-down effect of the Great Depression. The renaissance was much affected by the economic crisis of the 1930’s that brought the whole American society down, to the extent that, its short life quickly fell into oblivion.

3. Black Lives Matter: a Form of Struggle across Social Networks

In the core of this work, I argue that, the Harlem Renaissance was a form of Blacks’ struggle for equal rights as is Black Lives Matter today. The latter came into being as if the first failed to effectively solve the racial problems. The Black Lives Matter movement is a protest movement and contrary to the Harlem Renaissance that was geographically located in Harlem, New York City with the African American elite and intellectuals as actors, who focused their struggle on cultural revival, Black Lives Matter started through social networks and was globally rallied, regardless social classes. Youth from all borders wanted the movement to be a colorless outcry across social networks, because of many dysfunctionings from the politics. So, smartphones become the space of their virtual sittings and Nikita Carney observes:

With technological innovations and the increased accessibility of cell phones, most youth in the United States can tap into discourse on public media almost anywhere, anytime. Rather than needing to set aside time to engage in national and transnational conversations about race and oppression, increased access to the Internet and the ability to read and contribute to discourses on social media via one’s cell phone allows youth to integrate this participation in the public sphere into their daily activities. While the public sphere is not universally accessible, the rise of social media appears to be increasing accessibility to national discourse, particularly for youth who are coming of age with the rise of this technology.

Nikita Carney (2016, p.184)

Carney’s assertion is valid when social networks turn to erase frontiers among nations and social groups to enable the building of more tolerable and judicious human relations. It is quite reasonable that the success of this movement lies in the spontaneous effect of the information shared across social networks. India Thusi (2020, pp. 14-15) observes that, in the cities of New York, Detroit, Baltimore, and Ferguson, protestors were claiming respect for black lives, and by the means of smart phones, they were able to instantly record and broadcast the pain of police violence. The white police unreasonably victimize defenseless black males, and this is by reaction to this that, the movement gains sympathy from some white people, the black Diaspora and other minorities. Some white people’s support to the Black Lives Matter movement is well expressed in Grace Lee Boggs’ (2016) statement:

American revolution is not going to happen without black struggle.” And that’s very significant to me...For Black folks in this time of increased violence on our lives, police brutality, police murder, we needed a space for us to heal and also to conspire together as black people. So it’s important to resource Black organizations.”¹

Grace Lee Boggs’ (2016)

Lee Boggs’s invitation to support black organizations is rallied across social networks, which are the most efficient and low cost means of information and communication. Since the “social media provides a means to catalyze a movement, without the costs and infrastructure previously required” (Dixon and Dundes, 2020, p. 2), the police abuses are lively shared to shock and revolt people from all sides. Contrasting the efficiency and rapidity of internet in the call for rally with the traditional ways of rallying during the last decades, Zeynep Tufekci argues that,

The internet allows...movements to grow dramatically and rapidly, but without prior building of formal or informal organizational and other collective capacities...[with]no need to spend six months putting together a single rally when a hashtag could be used to summon protesters into the streets.

Zeynep Tufekci (2018, pp.xii–xiii)

Videos and comments on police forces lively broadcasted across social networks are about to create spontaneous general anger than any other means of communication, and the success of the Black Lives Matter movement lies in the free access of internet by all regardless class, race, gender and other differences.

Conclusion

This study has mainly been concerned with discussing the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Lives Matter movement as some forms of African Americans’ struggles among many others in America. Peculiarly, the research has investigated in knowing the reasons behind the Harlem Renaissance’s impotence in solving the racial problems, a status which has necessitated the current outcry rallied by the Black Lives Matter movement in order to be reexamined. In the process, the work first overflow both forms of struggles by focusing on their initial environments. It carried on by arguing that, the unsatisfactory achievements of the Harlem Renaissance come from the fact that, it was a movement led by black elites, much concerned with a cultural revival and a psychological healing from the past trauma than a well-organized political activist group to address the real threats faced by the majority of African Americans. So the failure of the Harlem Renaissance to lift the African Americans to social equality from all contexts resides in its lack of political activism and especially their elite who were not much concerned with the black masses’ daily plight in ghettos. The article has also argued that, the failure of the black elite of Harlem Renaissance many decades after, urged people to rise up and

¹ Grace Lee Boggs. “The Future of Solidarity: How White People Can Support the Movement for Black Lives” <http://collectiveliberation.org/8-lessons-from-the-future-of-solidarity-how-white-people-can-support-the-movement-for-black-lives/> 2016 Accessed on 12/02/2021

rally by means of new technologies of media to denounce white police abuses on black males. This twenty first century outcry known as the Black Lives Matter is an efficient form of protest because of its spontaneous birth, its globally rallied aspect and more precisely its tending colorless nature. The movement is famous today because it inspires other forms of protests from minorities, including a new movement: All Lives Matter.

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