# Emancipation Era: Theories and Struggles in the African American Experience

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*Abstract*

The history of Black people in the United States has been a history of constant re-articulation of political theories and practices of struggle against racism. The hegemonic spectrum of oppressive and disruptive dispositifs of political, social and economic racialization called out for a multiplicity of theoretical practices and discourses to fight back racist subjugation as well as to imagine possible paths towards freedom. In this regard, it is essential to analyze the rich and heterogeneous contributions of Emancipation to question how those different movements and voices framed and faced "the problem of the color line", and how they managed their braking points as well as their cooperative attitudes to one another. This study is carried out through a literature review of key references concerning African American historiography and Black radical political tradition.

*Keywords*: Emancipation, African American History, Reconstruction, Black Liberation Movement.

**Resumo**

A história dos Afroamericanos nos Estados Unidos foi uma história de rearticulações constantes das teorias e práticas políticas de luta contra o racismo. A variedade de dispositivos opressivos de racialização política, social e económica presentes exigiu uma multiplicidade de práticas teóricas e discursos para combater a submissão racista e também para imaginar caminhos possíveis para a libertação. Neste sentido, é fundamental analisar as ricas e heterogêneas contribuições da luta pela *Emancipação*, para compreender como os diferentes movimentos enquadram e enfrentam "o problema da linha da cor". Este estudo foi realizado através de uma revisão da literatura das referências chave relativas à historiografia Afroamericana e a tradição política negra radical.

**Palavras-Chave**: Emancipação, História Afroamericana, Reconstrução, Movimento Negro de Libertação

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## Introduction: The Institution of Slavery and the Atlantic Networks

The institutionalization of the social hierarchy based on race in the English colonies of North America occurred firstly in Virginia and Maryland, where the racial diversification was legalized through a corpus of laws which separated White servants from Black and Colored slaves, to avoid forms of cooperation that were already generating numerous revolts among the workers of the plantations system during the mid XVII century (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000). Legislation measures began to be promulgated in order to encourage and protect Christian white settlers (Davies, 1974: 98) and to forbid interracial marriages.[2] Therefore, in order to prevent organized insurrections, the legal separation between Whites and Blacks needed to be finalized. For this purpose, Virginia legislators approved in June 1680 *An Act for Preventing Negroes Insurrections*, and later on, in 1705 *An Act Concerning Servants and Slaves,* both of them contained in one of the most substantial legal apparatuses in the matter of slavery regulation laws: the corpus of the *Virginia Slave Codes.[3]* The 1705 act was fundamental to establishing the hierarchical system based on white supremacy, because of the identification of Whites as servants and Blacks as slaves, this provision guaranteed some basic rights to White Christian servants and designated Black slaves as material possessions of the masters

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[2] In 1664 the State of Maryland approved the first anti-miscegenation law. After this act, similar laws passed in Virginia (1691), Massachusetts (1705), North Carolina (1715), South Carolina (1717), Delaware, (1721) and Pennsylvania (1725). Interracial marriage bans were lifted during Reconstruction, but were reintroduced by the end of the 1880s, with the rise of the Jim Crow system (Sollors, 2000).

[3] The *Virginia Slave Codes* had a strong connection with the French *Code Noir*, promulgated by King Louis XIV to regulate slavery in the Antilles in 1685 and introduced in Louisiana in 1724. The *Code Noir* was one of the most effective corpora of laws disciplining slavery, race and social relations, and the role of religion and property in the French colonies (Palmer, 1996).

(Hening, 1809). This action helped to build and support a social hierarchy, based on race and religion, that promoted white identity as a predicament that brought slaves-owners, white proletariat and white servants under the same banner, and it was used to discredit and dismantle the antagonistic potential of multiracial forms of cooperation: racial differences were exploited, being in any case artificially constructed, to undermine the insurgent bonds between different social and ethnic groups, coming from the experiences of *maroons'* communities and motley crews (Allen, 1994; Rediker, 2014).

These legal acts actually shaped the chattel slavery system in the US colonies but could not kill the sense of initiative of slaves who were able to put into practice uprisings, riots and more organized revolts in the Southern plantations all along the XVIII century, thanks to the Atlantic networks – as it happened in Alexandria, Virginia (1767), Perth Amboy, New Jersey (1772), Saint Andrew's Parish, South Carolina (1774), Ulster County, New York (1775), Dorchester County, Maryland and in the Tar region, North Carolina (1775) (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000: 224). In this regard, two relevant aspects must be underlined to better understand not only the actual fights against slavery at that time, but also the future interconnections in the Emancipation struggles: one was the tight link between the Northern American colonies and the Caribbean in terms of a constant exchange of freedom practices of struggle,[4] and the other was the *Second Great Awakening* – a Christian religious revivals movement – that led to the birth of the *Black Christianity* and the *Exodus* symbolism, the founding paradigm of the Back-to-Africa movements that later on would influence, among others, Marcus Garvey's ideology.

Black slaves' revolts did not come to a halt during the years of the American Revolution. The acquisition of independence by the former British colonies did not change the conditions of the enslaved Black folk, only the oppressor had mutated: the federal government was now in charge of the repression. At this point the United States of America (USA) political class set out race differences with a greater emphasis, drawing a nation-wide unified legislation on slavery, based on white supremacy as the structure of power.

At the beginning of XIX century echoes of the Haitian Revolution reached the shores of the Southern States of the USA, exerting a strong political influence, for

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[4] A crucial change occurred in the slave trade in the mid of XVIII century: the majority of slaves brought to the Northern American colonies did not come from the African continent, but they were taken from the Caribbean islands, so they brought with them the knowledge of many different struggle practices already tested elsewhere, giving a great boost to the insurrections in the plantations.

example, in the case of the *Conspiracy of Gabriel Prosser* in Virginia, in 1800 and ten years later, once again in Virginia, in the case of the *Uprising of Nat Turner,* (Du Bois, 1903a: 44) the latter event set off strong reactions because of its powerful and wide dimensions: new slaves codes were promulgated, Black churches were shut down, *Free Negroes* were enslaved again as Southern States understood that the success of those revolts could undermine the entire economic infrastructure of the plantation system. Therefore, the tightening of the racist repression enhanced a different practice, the escape from bondage, the abandonment of forced labor in the plantations, that lasted as the main channel toward the *promised land* until the end of the Civil War.

**Civil War and Reconstruction Era: W.E.B. Du Bois' Perspective on Emancipation**

One of the main voices of the Emancipation theories, concerning in particular the struggles in the aftermath of the Civil War, was W.E.B. Du Bois, intellectual, scholar, historian and activist, defined by Cedric Robinson as "an independent Marxist thinker" (Robinson, 1977: 44). One of Du Bois' main works was published in 1935. In it the author narrated the counter-hegemonic history of the emancipation struggles of Black people in the South of the USA during the Reconstruction. For decades the canonical historiography has undermined the role of former Black slaves in the war and in the abolition of slavery, as well as their efforts in the construction of alternative political realities immediately after the war. W.E.B. Du Bois' book *Black Reconstruction* (1935) provides an alternative account to the official history of the Civil War and the Reconstruction era. His unorthodox use of the Marxist-Leninist approach, visible in the way he framed the relationship between US slavery and modern capitalism, and how these phenomena shaped the rise of the modern US state and the new capitalist class in relation to racism, serves as a tool to "question the presumed role of a vanguard and the masses in the development of revolutionary consciousness and effective revolutionary action" (*ibidem*: 45). This is not the place to critique Du Bois' book, nor to analyze in depth the complicated history of the Reconstruction. What could be interesting for the purpose of this work is to describe the historical moment to better understand the ideas of emancipation promoted by Du Bois and the way he perceived and framed that time's struggle.

When the Northern Army invaded the South, it had no intention to attack the property and even less to end slavery.[5] But in spite of what the North predicted, the US Civil War represented the turning point for the abolition of chattel slavery and for the promise of enfranchisement and emancipation. The question of slavery became suddenly the central issue of the war for a very simple reason: the battleground was the South, where almost sixty thousand *Free Negros* and four million slaves lived; some of them, since the beginning of the war, had started to abandon the plantations and to join the Northern Army, putting into practice what W.E.B. Du Bois called a "General Strike" (Du Bois, 1935):

> The General Strike had not been planned nor centrally organized. Instead Du Bois had termed as a general strike the total impact on the secessionist South of a series of actions circumstantially related to each other. Some two hundred thousand Blacks, most of them slaves, had become part of the Union's military force. These and an even larger number of blacks had withdrawn their productive labor and paramilitary services for the Confederacy, transferring a substantial portion of them to the Union. In addition, tens of thousands of slaves and poor whites had emigrated from the South. The former were escaping slavery, the latter their poverty and their demands and ravages of war. The result was to weaken critically the secessionists. (Robinson, 1977: 48)

Following the intensification of war efforts, insubordination practices rose significantly, a clear illustration of "multiple forms of stubborn resistance, the sabotage of labor discipline and the numerous attempts of escape from plantations[6]" (Mezzadra, 2010: 69), definitively compromising the foundations of the Southern system of production. The fugitive slaves saw in the war the opportunity to fight their own battle: for them "the war against the South had simply to be the war against slavery" (Du Bois, 1935: 79).

*The Emancipation Proclamation* was promulgated in 1863 and was addressed to all the slaves of all the states fighting against the Union. Lincoln's Proclamation just gave the legal consensus to a reality that already existed: if slaves were free at that time, it was

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5 "President Lincoln's initial program to reconstruct the nation included an elaborate plan to deport black people, first to Liberia and later on what he believed was a more practical location: Central America", (Kelley, 2002:18).
6 My translation.

because they had freed themselves thanks to their own strategies and their political decision to join the battle (*ibidem*: 84).

With the XIII Amendment to the US Constitution slavery was abolished, while with the XIV and the XV Amendments the civil rights to former slaves and the right to vote to the new citizens were granted. These legal alterations marked the beginning of the Reconstruction Era (Foner, 1988). This moment represented, for many Black communities, the opportunity for a true and stable emancipation, the road to full citizenship rights, the moment for the construction of social and racial equality, even though, in most cases, they had to face racial violence, the kind that would turn out to be organized in the Ku Klux Klan heritage of the "slaves' hunters".

This period knew many different social and political experiments and possibilities. For the first time in US history Black people could vote and get elected in federal, state and local political institutions. One of the most important organization was the "Union League", which tried to bring former slaves and white workers and peasants together. The League promoted several political activities, including building churches and schools, organizing labor strikes and protests, as well as mentoring Black political leaders, setting up armed militias to defend Black communities from racist attacks, and helping to organize and mobilize Blacks to run for political office (Taylor, 2008). Radical Reconstruction, in Du Bois' own words,

> was a test of the whole theory of American government. It was a dictatorship backed by the military arm of the United States by which the governments of the Southern states were to be coerced into accepting a new form of administration, in which the freedmen and the poor whites were to hold the overwhelming balance of political power. As soon as political power was successfully delivered in to the hands of these elements, the Federal government was to withdraw and full democracy ensue. (Du Bois, 1935: 345)

In Du Bois' perspective, emancipation passed through an alternative organization of the lands, a cooperative attitude between black and white peasants and workers trying to establish an alliance between the Northern and the Southern lower and working classes. This had to include a substantial attention to the education system and to the fact that non-industrial workers could be a revolutionary social force in the rising capitalist society in the US (Robinson, 1977: 50). For Du Bois the "dictatorship of labor" - which was not

workers' party oriented but instead an attempt of social revolution run by radical black organizations backed by the federal army – became the key element for the transformation of the South and for the democratization of the whole country through the social control of the redistribution of the land, which was the essential issue of the economy of the South after slavery collapsed (Du Bois, 1935: 367). The initial success of this structural transformation in the South witnessed a massive expansion of public schools, public hospitals, public aid and social commitment to care for the lower classes (Taylor, 2008). However, these advances in social emancipation were fatally destroyed by the advancement of the Northern capitalism, by the social consequences of the strong economic depression of the 1873, by the vehement racism that spread aggressively in the South as well as within the national working class, whose unions refused to represent black workers from the South. As Cedric Robinson wrote:

> Once Northern capital had penetrated the Southern economy sufficiently to displace the Southern capitalists and to dominate its future development it ceased to depend on black electorates and state legislatures controlled by blacks and members of the Northern white petty bourgeoisie. The alliance ended with the withdrawal of federal troops from the South and the destruction of the governments supported by federal force. (Robinson, 1977: 49)

Therefore, in a short time a new form of forced labor was about to be born, a new racist legalized system was about to discipline once again the lives of Black people in the South: the separated but equal principle of the Jim Crow segregationist system. A shift occurred from the "Coming of the Lord" (the glorious years of the Reconstruction)[7] to the strange fruits bore by Southern trees (the lynchings of the Jim Crow era). Thus, it became urgent to re-think different approaches to anti-racist struggles and new visions for emancipation.

## Exodus symbolism and the Back-to-Africa Movements

The Exodus symbolism was a fundamental paradigm to read other ways Black people elaborated the road toward emancipation and the imagination of real freedom: "the

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[7] Du Bois defined the disruption of slavery and the following possibility of political emancipation using this expression.

desire to leave Babylon, if you will, and the search for a new land tells us a great deal about what people dream about, what they want, how they might want to reconstruct their lives" (Kelley, 2002: 16). The multiple interpretations of the biblical Exodus, in the antebellum period as well as after the Civil war, intensively influenced and guided the escapes, movements, migrations, travels and dislocations to the African continent and elsewhere of African Americans throughout their history.

The religious language and references to the biblical Exodus have been used to articulate political actions and political discourses for the emancipation. The circulation of the Exodus vocabulary was closely connected to the *Second Great Awakening* (1770-1820) and the consequent birth of the Black Church (Glaude, 2000: 56). The role of the institution of the Black Church has been crucial and preponderant for the process of the construction of a political identity of the Black folk as a community: it was the first black institution, independent from the control of white masters and completely autonomous, which with time assumed the position of mediator between people's claims and demands and the racist state. Its prominent role was to create the foundations for solidarity and cooperation among Black people, mostly to unify the struggles against white supremacy and build a sense of community (*ibidem*: 22). The Black Church became the communal space for the elaboration of the political grammar for emancipation, a space in which it was possible to imagine a shared design for the passage from a state of oppression to a state of salvation, which contained within it the promise of Emancipation in the new *Canaan*. The religious language invaded the political space becoming the quintessential mechanism to criticize US racism and to express a new political identity – an escape for a new beginning somewhere else – and the grievances linked to Black people's rights (Du Bois, 1903b). As the scholar Robin D.G. Kelley pointed out, "Exodus represented dreams of black self-determination, of being on our own, under our own rules and beliefs, developing our own cultures, without interference" (2002: 17).

During the years of slavery, the *Promised Land* included not only the "supposed-to-be-free" North, but also Canada and Mexico. However, when the Civil War broke out, the main issue became the citizenship. At that time many black leaders started to claim their rights of citizenship, while some others, frustrated by the reluctant racist state that kept them at the bottom of the social and political hierarchy, expressed their desire to draw different political projects for self-determination, connecting the Exodus symbolism with the emerging ideas of *Black Nationalism*. They didn't feel any affiliation to the

United States project, so they turned their eyes elsewhere: "Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Jermain Loguen, Samuel Ringgold Ward, Paul Cuffe and Martin Delany called on Black people to find a homeland on their own" (*ibidem*: 17).

The idea of returning to the Motherland has always been part of the political agenda of Black leaders since the abolitionist movement. As Du Bois reminded, in the Second Anniversary of the Bandung Conference held in Harlem on April 30th 1957:

> From the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, the Africans imported to America regarded themselves as temporary settlers destined to return eventually to Africa. Their increasing revolts against the slave system, which culminated in the eighteenth century, showed a feeling of close kinship to the motherland and even well into the nineteenth century they called their organizations 'African', as witness the 'African unions' of New York and Newport and the African Churches of Philadelphia and New York. In the West Indies and South America there was even closer indication of feelings of kinship with Africa and the East […] Civil War and emancipation intervened and American Negroes looked forward to becoming free and equal here with no thought of return to Africa or of kinship with the world's darker peoples. However, the rise of the Negro was hindered by disenfranchisement, lynching and caste legislation. There was some recurrence of the "Back to Africa" idea and increased sympathy for darker folk who suffered the same sort of caste restrictions as American Negroes. (Du Bois, 1986: 329-333)

One of the most relevant breaking points of the political strategies for emancipation lay here. The rupture of the Jim Crow system and of the new wave of aggressive racism brought the issues of citizenship and nationality to the center of the debate among Black leaders, scholars, intellectuals and activists. The freedom movement so far had pushed towards an integrationist perspective, that is to say, towards access to the enjoyment of full citizenship rights within the country. However, this did not translate into assimilation, as this process evokes the erasure of that peculiar history of struggle that generated definitions of identity and nationality based on the distinct experiences of African Americans in the USA. Since the institutional apartheid prevented Black people from actually seeing those rights granted to them, the need to express a collective identity, for some Black political thinkers, drove them to search for another homeland.

The pioneer of the back-to-Africa movements was Paul Cuffe, a *freeman* from Massachusetts, founder of "The Friendly Society for the Emigration of Free Negroes from America". In 1812 he was able to take thirty-eight people from the USA to what is now Sierra Leone (Harris, 1972). But the massive circulation of the ideas and the political projects linked to the return to the motherland occurred during the second half of the XIX century. One of the prominent promoters was Henry McNeil Turner, a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, who encouraged African Americans to migrate to Liberia, in West Africa.[8] Emphasizing the awareness of African heritage of Black Americans and, at the same time, the impossibility for them to find absolute freedom in the USA, Turner dedicated his political life to constantly address this predicament, pushing and supporting Black people to move to Liberia (Redkey, 1969). He truly believed that "white supremacy generated black self-hatred" (Kelley, 2002: 21), a situation that could prevent them from establishing forms of self-determination, as long as they remained in the legalized apartheid of the South, or in the legally free North, but practically racist and segregationist as the rest of the country. Therefore, together with other activists such as Alexander Crummell, Henry Highland Garnet and Edward Wilmot Blyden – whose interesting shift in positioning will be discussed later– and other members of Back-to-Africa organizations, bishop Turner identified Liberia as the *promised land* and fostered a rather controversial idea of returning, as it was dangerously close to a civilizing mission, where "to civilize" stood for "to Christianize":

> the policy of Liberia is to diffuse among them [aborigines] as rapidly as possible the principles of Christianity and civilization, to prepare them to take an active part in the duties of nationality which we are endeavoring to erect […]. [Liberia] appeals to those who believe that the well-established African nationality is the most direct and efficient mean of securing respectability and independence for the African race. (Blyden, 1992: 125-126)

Basically, the return's perspectives of these movements were deeply rooted in the Western modern political tradition of progress, manifest destiny, modernization, development, nationalism and race. It was presented as a matter of manhood rights, as the

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[8] Liberia proclaimed its independence in 1847, and suddenly turned out to be a settlement of the American Colonization Society (ACS), which believed black people would have faced better chances for freedom and prosperity in Africa rather than in the USA.

desire of joining the "fatherland" stressed the fact that the nationalist fight was a man's job. Indeed, there was not much room for women in these movements, with masculinity being a central reference, in line with the modern nationalist tradition. Therefore, Liberia represented for them the place where they could fulfill their destiny, being the elected people, according to their reading of the Exodus symbolism, and establish a type of citizenship in accordance with their interpretations of identity, nationalism and belonging, based on the communal African heritage. They intended to prove that it was possible for Black people to create a powerful free black nation, completely independent from white economic, social and political control, where everybody could finally fully enjoy citizenship rights. But in truth, this project turned out to be a form of exploitative colonialism as American-Liberians became "the new exploitative ruling class" and "as a result, the indigenous population of Liberia was exploited and oppressed by African-Americans, who had ironically returned to their ancestral homeland to escape tyranny" (Kelley, 2002: 22). Even because the *Africa of the mind* they portrayed in their representations and discourses was far different from the places they actually traveled to, they were trapped between the imaginative expectations of the fatherland they had imagined and the real material conditions they met once they moved to an African context. In Liberia they applied, most of the time, theoretical approaches derived from the traditional Euro-American political modernity, as expressed in Martin Delany's description of his first travel to Africa:

> the first sight and impression of the coast of Africa are always inspiring, producing *the most pleasant emotions* […] until they merge into feelings of *almost intense excitement* […] the first symptoms are succeeded by a *relaxity of feelings* in which there is a disposition to stretch, gape and yawn with fatigue. The second may or may not be succeeded by *actual febrile attacks* […] but there is one more remarkable… A *feeling of regret* that you left your native country for a strange one. (*apud* Gilroy, 1993: 24)[9]

Delany expressed in this passage the main paradox that lays under the return-to-Africa projects: the indissoluble contradiction of feeling like an alien in the country in which he was born, because of the extreme difficulty in reaching a condition of true

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9 Italics added by author.

freedom there, and the impossibility of actually returning home, because "home" and the road to it was nowhere to be found, since it was destroyed by the tragedy of slavery. Caught up in this dilemma, many Black intellectuals of that time shifted positions very often, struggling to weld the fracture of being "a nation within the nation", some of them abandoning the idea of moving to the African continent, and others subverting the Christian and modern paradigms which lay under their idea of "black nation", getting closer instead to the West African political traditions, even though this did not lead to the abandonment of an exploitative attitude towards the African lands and native populations. That was the case with Edward Wilmot Blyden, who, after a long period of studies, left the Christianization and the Western oriented idea of civilization behind and moved closer to West African cultures and Islamic religion. Even though he still considered Liberia as the place that Black settlers could use for their dreams of a new society, he abandoned Western culture as the hegemonic model, considering instead other ways that "might offer a superior road to freedom" (Kelley, 2002: 23). All those emigration movements and organizations, with all the theoretical and practical limitations, expressed the frustration of African Americans in that particular moment of the US history. At the same time they express the attempts to imagine an idea of freedom far away from the structures of white power. For sure they paved the way for Marcus Garvey's political ideas.

**Education and Emancipation: Du Bois and Washington's debate and the Women's educational practice in the post-war South**

The possible solution to fill the gap of the contradiction of African Americans' predicament included other possible ways besides the exodus perspective. This was the case of the movements and of the intellectuals who conceived education as the main tool for liberation. Good examples are the famous debate between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, as well as the perspective fostered by Southern Black women, who conceived education the key element in the struggle for emancipation.

After Reconstruction, with the rising of Jim Crow and the disenfranchisement of Black people, new political leaderships and perspectives were born and experimented. The main issue concerned education, viewed by some intellectuals and activists as the right way to fight and defeat the condition of oppression and inferiorization that steamed from the segregation process. In the disorder resulting from the political system's change, Booker T. Washington, who had been born a slave and after the Civil War became an

educator, founded the "Tuskegee Institute", with the goal of promoting programs for industrial education dedicated to Black people. Thanks to this initiative, he found the way to become a new significant voice of the African American Southern community. Washington proposed a way towards emancipation which was supposed to pass through a technical education on agriculture and industrial subjects, with the goal of integrating Black people in the American capitalist society. He firmly believed that "no race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem" (Washington, 2000: 153) and that the demands for civil rights should not overshadow the opportunities for an economic and social development. His ideology, in fact, was not channeled into a subversive or revolutionary perspective of "changing the system", but instead it promoted an idea of liberation which had perfect assimilation into US society as the ultimate goal. That meant for Black people to acquire all the technical knowledge that could allow them, through hard work, to finally own their businesses and be a part of that world. For this reason, he believed that it was not appropriate or advantageous, at that moment, for Black people to openly and strongly protest against racism, because speaking and taking actions against white prejudice could have retarded the possibility of advancement:

> My own belief is, although I have never before said so in so many words, that the time will come when the Negro in the South will be accorded all the political rights which his ability, character and material possessions entitle him to. I think, though, that the opportunity to freely exercise such political rights will not come in any large degree through outside or artificial forcing, but will be accorded to the Negro by the Southern white people themselves, and that they will protect him in the exercise of those rights. (*ibidem*: 161)

Washington's "accommodation" perspective (Lawler and Davenport, 2005: 18) was actually highly contested and opposed by other leaders of the Black liberation movement. He fought for Black people to reach the same material and economic conditions of white people, to enter the capitalist world as owners or entrepreneurs, but still remaining separated from them. Washington's famous speech, known as "The Atlanta Compromise", pronounced in 1895 on the occasion of "The Cotton States and International Exposition", was the moment of consolidation of his leadership in the South: "progress for Blacks

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comes from a steady job, a bank account, a piece of property, not from protest and voting drives […] the higher attainments of culture and citizenship shall be deferred until blacks master the lower traits of thrift and industry" (Bauerlein, 2004-2005: 107). While white America welcomed Booker T. Washington's positions in a very positive way, as also Black moderates did, criticism arose in the ranks of the Black Liberation Movement. One of the harshest opponents of Washington was W.E.B. Du Bois, who wrote in a chapter of his book *The Souls of the Black folk*:

> Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission; but adjustment at such a peculiar time as to make his programme unique. This is an age of unusual economic development, and Mr. Washington's programme naturally takes an economic cast, becoming a gospel of Work and Money to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life […] and Mr. Washington's programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races. Again, in our own land, the reaction from the sentiment of war time has given impetus to race-prejudice against Negroes, and Mr. Washington withdraws many of the high demands of Negroes as men and American citizens. (Du Bois, 1903a: 48)

The response to Washington's industrial training approach formulated by Du Bois included a political struggle that should have been carried out following a three-fold strategy: the right to vote; civic equality; and the education of youth according to their ability. Du Bois' emphasis on the civil rights struggle and on a wider access to higher education programs for Black people was his oppositional argument against Booker T. Washington's ideology. This was the key reason that pushed Du Bois to create the "Niagara Movement", in 1905, whose ideas later on flew into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP – 1909). It is not relevant in this context to enter into the personal relationship and conflicts between these two leaders. The issue that needs to be underlined here is the fact that both of them found in education the key to emancipation and liberation: "Washington and Du Bois came to define race relations in the country – militancy vs. conciliation, separatism vs. assimilation, higher education vs. trade school training" (Bauerlein, 2004-2005: 114).

One of the most invisibilized aspects in the Emancipation struggles was the moment of cooperation between Black and White women fighting illiteracy in the South after Reconstruction, in times when the access to educational institutions for Black people was greatly impeded by aggressive racist practices. In this scenario, in the South, the role of women was fundamental in the education realm. During the chaotic moment of the post-war,

> about half of the volunteer teachers who joined the massive educational campaign organized by the Freedman's Bureau were women. Northern White women went South during the Reconstruction to assist their Black sisters who were absolutely determined to wipe out illiteracy among the millions of former slaves. (Davis, 1983: 107)

Women exchanged teaching practices and methods among themselves continuously, as the Freedman's Record actually shows, and even though educational opportunities for Black people dramatically dropped with the rise of Jim Crow, the memory of the Reconstruction years worked as a constant reminder of the importance of education and "the beacon of knowledge was not easily extinguished", but instead was the tool "to fight for land and for political power" (*ibidem*: 109). Once again, the role of the Black Church was pivotal and the position Black women were able to achieve in it was preponderant for the struggle for education. They began to create their own organizations within the religious institutions, in order to make their voices heard and build their own agenda by challenging racist and sexist stereotypes imposed on them by Whites as well as by Black men, not just within the Church but in the society in general (Chinn, 2014: 10). Teaching revealed to be the main tool not only for their own emancipation from a position of inferiority within the Church and the racial and social hierarchy in the US, but also for the emancipation of the general condition of Black people in the South. They built a "fortress", as Angela Davis wrote, and this experience led to the strategic use of knowledge during the Jim Crow era, when segregated black schools started to turn into political laboratories of resistance against racism (hooks, 1994).

**Marcus Garvey's Black (Inter)Nationalism**

Marcus Garvey was born at the end of the XIX century in Jamaica, where he got involved in the struggle for political rights for Black people. After spending his youth in Kingston, listening to preachers in various different churches, learning the oratorical skills and techniques, participating in biblical studies, reading and studying by himself all the books and newspapers he could find, Garvey decided to leave his country to work abroad in order to save money and come back to Jamaica to continue his struggle. Initially he migrated to Costa Rica and later on to other Southern American countries, becoming aware of the exploitative conditions Black workers were facing everywhere. He tried very hard to organize workers coming from the Caribbean region and working in the plantations in Central and South America, but his two years' campaign was largely unsuccessful (Lawler and Davenport, 2005: 15). Therefore, he decided to travel to London, in order to get in touch with other "delegates representing Black communities in England, the West Indies and the United States, to discuss how to promote pan-Africanism" (*ibidem*: 17).

Upon return to Jamaica, in 1914, he created the "Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and African Communities League", shortened as UNIA, with the intention to "unite Jamaica's Black population behind a spirit of racial pride and a program of educational and economic opportunity. Furthermore, the UNIA vowed to work for the establishment of independent black-ruled nations in Africa" (*ibidem*: 21).

Garvey's conception of emancipation was rooted in the *self-reliance* of Black people in building the possibilities for a social and economic development in order to reach a concrete and solid advancement in all the realms of life. Booker T. Washington's influence was fundamental for the elaboration of Garvey's political view. In fact, as the African American leader, Marcus Garvey also truly and deeply believed that the technical education and the entrepreneurial spirit could lead to the ultimate liberation of Black people everywhere in the world. Garvey was also sure that the road towards emancipation depended on a rigid separatism between Blacks and Whites, going further than Washington's political view on interracial relations, that is to say that Marcus Garvey firmly believed in maintaining the "Negroes Healthy Race" separated from the whites. He strongly opposed miscegenation and

racial intermarriage – defining it as a "race suicide" (*ibidem*: 25) – in order to preserve the purity of the Black race as a reaction against the annihilation of Black pride by hundreds of years of bondage and racism.

Stating and demanding the independence of Black nations all over the world, with a special attention to the African continent, Garvey went beyond the local case of Jamaica and the Caribbean, claiming civil rights and liberation for all Black people fighting against colonialism and racism. His Pan-African ideology, thus, present in his theoretical approach, laid the infrastructure for the development of his political view, that Robin D.G. Kelley describes as "African Fundamentalism". Indeed, it could be defined as "a revision of Christianity rooted in Ethiopianism, African Methodism and a variety of religious beliefs that would eventually make their way into Rastafarian faith" (Kelley, 2002: 24). Garvey brought to life the largest "African Redemption" movement, promoting an idea of a future Africa, free from the colonial rule, that "embraced certain Western ideas and technologies but transformed them to suit Black people's needs" (*ibidem*: 24).

Since in Jamaica his political views were not fully accepted, he decided to move to the USA, preaching and giving speeches in the Southern States. There, Garvey had the chance to meet Hubert Harrison, an educator, socialist activist and a spokesman for Black unity. Thanks to him, Garvey gained a lot of visibility and popularity among black workers and peasants of the segregated South:

> Wherever he traveled, Garvey spoke out against the injustices his race was forced to endure. Blacks should be proud of their blood, he told his audiences, but he warned them they would never be given the respect and equality they deserved until they improved themselves. Blacks first needed to unite for their own protection, and they must obtain more education and free themselves of their dependence from white employers. (Lawler and Davenport, 2005: 31)

He also shared the ideas of the first African American emigration movements, marrying their belief in the establishment of a powerful Black nation in Africa, when the condition within the country seemed disadvantageous:

> The only wise thing for us as ambitious Negroes to do is to organize the world over, and build up for the race a mighty nation of our own in Africa. And this race of ours

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that cannot get recognition and respect in the country where we were slaves, by using our own ability, power and genius, would develop for ourselves in another country in our habitat a nation of our own, and be able to send back from that country, — from that native habitat — to the country where we were once enslaved, representatives of our race, that would get as much respect as any other ambassadors from any other race or nation. (Garvey, 2006: 42)

For this purpose, Garvey decided to open a chapter of his organization in the USA. Thus, he founded a branch of the UNIA in New York, supported since 1918 by the weekly newspaper *Negro World*, a very powerful tool of Garvey's political propaganda, up to spread the ideals of "Black Universal Solidarity".

In 1919 the UNIA launched the ambitious project of the Black Star Line, a black-owned shipping company, which represented for Garvey the achievement of economic independence. The Black Star Line, with the purpose, besides the maritime trade, of helping Black people to return to their motherland (Africa), was more than a company: it was the embodiment of the possibility for Black people in the USA to own and manage their own businesses, without following the lead of white people. Garvey sought by all means to demonstrate that Black people could be powerful and independent entrepreneurs, just as much as white people. As a matter of fact, many UNIA supporters bought the company's stocks, believing in the project and in what that economic experiment represented for them.

In addition to the Black Star Line, pursuing his idea of a Pan-Africanism which advocated the liberation of Black people all over the world, Garvey organized in Harlem, in 1920, the first International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World, days of conferences, speeches and parades. It was a display of Black pride and belonging: "the marchers carried banners that proclaimed "Down with the Lynching", "Join the Fight for Freedom" and "Africa Must be Free" […] Many of those watching felt for the first time the power and the united spirit of an aroused black race" (Lawler and Davenport: 44). Marcus Garvey's popularity in the USA was at its highest. He was able to fill the empty space in the leadership of the Black Liberation Movement in the United States and he suddenly became the prominent voice of the struggle for emancipation. Garvey proved to be way more radical than Booker T. Washington, whose positioning towards white people was much softer than the one acquired by Garvey, and more appealing than W.E.B. Du

Bois, whose idea of higher education left hundreds of black workers, especially in the South, hesitant and uncommitted.

Marcus Garvey's entrepreneurial experience in the USA failed, in part because of bad investments, corruption and a strong and stubborn opposition of the US government – by declaring UNIA's activities dangerous, a threat to law and order in the country. Another reason for the collapse of his organization resulted from the internal conflicts shaking UNIA, as well as from his controversial decision to meet with the leader of the Ku Klux Klan, whom he presented an idea of emancipation that was subversive and undesirable for the US government. Garvey portrayed an image of empowered Black people, in control of their economic possibilities, proud of their African heritage and their Pan-African political commitment, remaining resolutely convinced of the necessity of racial separatism:

> The economic philosophy undergirding Garveyism was independent enterprise and entrepreneurship. In this philosophy, industries such as the Black Star Line would not only serve black people but would also be a source of capital placed entirely in black hands, wealth for a rising race. The problem was that Marcus Garvey trusted his lieutenants; he didn't believe they would skim wealth off the top or consider their personal desire for wealth above the greater good of the African world. (Kelley, 2002: 29)

In spite of all his ambiguous and controversial points of views and all his political limitations, Marcus Garvey (1923) remains one of the most influential leaders of the Black Liberation Movement, and not just in the USA. He spent all his life promoting Black international solidarity, the return of Black people to an Africa freed from colonial exploitation, although paradoxically he never visited any African country. But this didn't prevent his legacy from having a great impact on African leaders and political militants, as it was for Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.

Garvey had a very strong influence on African American activists, among others, on Malcolm X's ideology – especially considering Malcolm's claims for rigid racial separatism, Afrocentrism and economic self-empowerment – and on Black Panther Party's aesthetics and internationalism, being the Oakland-based

party actually committed in the full support and solidarity with the anti-colonial struggles, particularly in Africa.


**Towards Conclusions**

The various different voices advancing emancipation theories and developing struggles are incredibly relevant for today, as they still shape the discourses, the representations and the political practices about race, racism and anti-racist struggles to come. These movements have deeply influenced the Civil Rights Movement and the radical expressions of the late '60s and '70s of the XX century, providing practices and theoretical paradigms which inhabited new images and revisited ideas of liberation. Underlining the variety of positionings and standpoints in the anti-racist struggles adds much more complexity and depth to this particular moment of the USA political history, pointing out the fact that usually some of the contributions to the political debate on Emancipation, such as the back-to-Africa movements, or the role of women in the struggle for education in the South, have been marginalized and in some cases invisibilized, in favor of dominant historical narrations.

The Emancipation era is very relevant because it shows how the Black Liberation Movement was able to adapt and shift position against the different masks worn by institutional racism. Many changes occurred altogether in a relatively short amount of time. In just over fifty years, Black people in the USA had to deal with the end of chattel slavery, the Civil War, the Reconstruction, its failure, the establishment of the legal segregated system and the lynchings in the South and not-formal-but-actual segregation in the North. Black militants, activists, organizations and movements always found the strength to question, challenge and fight back the different faces of racism. As Malcolm X reaffirmed: "racism is like a Cadillac, they bring out a new model every year. The 1960 Cadillac doesn't look like the 1921 Cadillac, but it is still a Cadillac; it has simply changed form" (*apud* Mellino, 2012: 94). Racism is in continuous transformation; it needs to be reshaped, to adjust to the continuous challenges brought up by the anti-racial struggle in order to be effective. It changes according to the social conditions and the different subjectivities involved. But racism is not just a product of power manipulation, it is not exclusively determined by power. Racism has also a *microphysics* dimension

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which finds its main articulation points in the residual elements of colonialism in the mass culture and in its stereotypes and representations. Racism sheds its skin, but it is also a constitutive trait of US society, concerning not just its material relations but also  its symbolic structures *(ibidem*: 94).

For these reasons, the inestimable richness of the various contributions of the Emancipation era, with all the failures, fallacies and limitations they showed, is considerably relevant in anticipation of new challenges to come.

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