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Community Economic Development and the Concept of Justice

Steven H. Hobbs

The theme for this discussion group gave me a chance to reflect on the concept of Justice. I think that the ideal of justice should proceed and underpin any efforts at community economic development. Justice should shape and inform the choices that we make as we pursue community economic development. My hope is that this discussion group offers us an opportunity to consider notions of justice that can guide our work. Is it just about the chance for an entrepreneur to make money? Does the work actually improve a community? If so, how does one define community and measure improvement? What happens if community economic development ends up benefiting those who have money to invest in the development? Here I think of the issue of gentrification.

My idea is to go back and take a look at some historical examples of efforts at community development. The work of Marcus Garvey in the first part of the twentieth century provides an example of early economic community development. Garvey, who came from Jamaica to the United States in 1916, sought to uplift the race through his organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA).¹ Inspired by Booker T. Washington and his work at Tuskegee Institute, Garvey initially sought to construct a similar school in the West Indies. However, as he traveled about the country raising funds, Garvey's vision of the task ahead grew and became sophisticated and internationalized. In a concise statement reflecting self-determination he said:

And then I read *Up From Slavery*, by Booker T. Washington. And then my doom, if I may so call it—of being a race leader dawned upon me. I asked. . . . Where is the Black Man's government? Where is his kingdom? Where

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1. To establish a Universal Confraternity among the race; to promote the spirit of race pride and love; to reclaim the fallen of the race; to administer to and assist the needy; to assist in civilizing the backward tribes of Africa; to strengthen the imperialism of independent African States; to establish Commissionaires or Agencies in the principle countries of the world for the protection of all Negroes, irrespective of nationality' to promote conscientious Christian worship among the naïve tribes of Africa; to establish Universities, Colleges and Secondary Schools for the further education and culture of boys and girls of the race; to conduct a world-wide commercial and industrial intercourse. PHILOSOPHY AND OPINIONS OF MARCUS GARVEY 38 (Amy Jacques Garvey ed., 2d ed. (1967).

is his President, his country and his ambassadors, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs? I could not find them, and then I declared, "I will help to make them!"²

Garvey sought, among other objectives, to "promote the spirit of race pride and love; to reclaim the fallen of the race; . . . to strengthen the imperialism of independent African States; . . . to conduct a world-wide commercial and industrial intercourse."³ Garvey's movement for African redemption came as the world was emerging from the throes of a horrible war fought to preserve democracy. Garvey saw in the war and times a struggle by oppressed people to gain independence and self-determination. In early November 1918, Garvey announced a UNIA-sponsored conference to develop the "peace conference demands and belated war aims of the Negroes."⁴ Nearly two thousand persons met in New York on November 10, 1918, and passed a resolution to be presented at the Paris Peace Conference. The resolution read in part:

- (1) That the principle of self-determination be applied to Africa and all European controlled colonies in which people of African descent predominate.
- (2) That all economic barriers that hamper the industrial development of Africa be removed. . . .
- (9) That the captured German colonies in Africa be turned over to the natives with educated Western and Eastern Negroes as their leaders.⁵

Garvey sought to promote the idea of equality for peoples of African descent. Garvey sought to instill dignity and pride in the race. He also sought to demand justice and freedom for his people. For Garvey, such a demand could only be asserted if blacks had a nation that could offer powerful protection of the full panoply of human rights. Among those rights as described in the Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World:

23. We declare it inhuman and unfair to boycott Negroes from industries and labor in any part of the world.
27. We believe in the self-determination of all peoples.

2. E. DAVID CRONIN, *BLACK MOSES* 15–16 (1949).

3. Marcus Garvey, A Talk with Afro-West Indians at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Booker T. Washington Papers, DLC (n.d.) (originally printed and published by the African Communities League; manuscript corrections in Garvey's hand); 1 MARCUS GARVEY, *MARCUS GARVEY AND UNIA PAPERS, 1826–AUGUST 2019*, at 55–64 (Robert Abraham Hill ed., 1983) [hereinafter 1 MARCUS GARVEY AND UNIA PAPERS].

4. 1 MARCUS GARVEY AND UNIA PAPERS, *supra* note 3, at 284.

5. *Id.* at 299.

50. We demand a free and unfettered commercial intercourse with all the Negro people of the world.⁶

Garvey's ideal of Justice encompassed freedom, equality, human dignity, and self-determination. The ability to freely engage in commercial enterprises was part of his vision of justice. To this end, Garvey and the UNIA established the Black Star Line, a steamship company that endeavored to trade between the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. They also created the Negro Factories Corporation designed to create factories that were run by black people. The corporation included "a chain of cooperative grocery stores, a restaurant, a steam laundry, a tailoring and dress-making shop, a millinery store and publishing house."⁷

What I learn from Garvey is that we should approach community economic development as a fundamental human right that can be actualized by creating business opportunities that uplift the community. In other words, we need a holistic approach to solving the economic, social, and political inequities that plague too many communities. I am still working on the particulars, but my sense is that we have to start with the children's fundamental needs, including the basics of education, healthcare, housing, and nutrition. Then we have to focus on entrepreneurial education in whatever venues are available. And, finally, we need institutions that will build enterprises that will generate the possibility of financial independence.

6. 2 MARCUS GARVEY, *MARCUS GARVEY AND UNIA PAPERS, AUGUST 1919–AUGUST 1920*, at 571–77 (Robert Abraham Hill ed., 1983).

7. RUPERT LEWIS, *MARCUS GARVEY: ANTI-COLONIAL CHAMPION* 70–71 (1987).

