

# **A Proletarian Critique of the Nation of Islam**

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This is a proletarian critique of the U.S. based Nation of Islam (NOI). With anything between 20,000 and 100,000 members and capable of engineering massive reactionary mobilizations, the Nation represents a significant counter-revolutionary force. The pamphlet looks at NOI's history and evolution, the way it exploits its membership and its promotion of anti-working class, sexist, homophobic and racist ideology. Melancholic Troglodytes hope this text will encourage further analysis of NOI, religion and race from a class perspective.

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## 1) General Historical Sketch

### The impact of slavery

With anything between 20,000 to 100,000 members, considerable financial assets and increasing political clout the Nation of Islam (NOI) represents a significant counter-revolutionary force in North American society. In many ways the Nation has only a tangential relationship to the Koran and Hadith (sayings of the prophet Mohammad), which played such a central role in the development of Islam in Arabia and conquered neighbouring countries. That a social movement, which transformed the world over a millennium ago, should be so reflected in North American life is not without its ironies. The incursions of Muslim slave traders into Africa provided the pre-conditions that would be subsequently exploited in the Christian trans-Atlantic slave trade. The British colonisation of North America was set out on the basis of religious mission which allowed for the enslavement of non-Christians – originally Native Americans and then also Africans.

Some scholars have argued, '10–30% of slaves brought from Western Africa to the Americas were Muslim, and many of them practiced their religion upon arrival' (Steller 1996). Michael Gomez looking at figures for the entire continent writes: 'Given that between 400,000 and 523,000 Africans came to North America during the slave trade, at least 200,000 came from areas influenced by Islam in varying degrees. Muslims have come to America by the thousands, if not the tens of thousands' (quoted in Segal 2001: 225). There were numerous African Muslims amongst the early Spanish explorers, 'either enslaved or hired, [working] as navigators, guides, and sailors for the Christian conquistadors' (Gardell 1996: 32). According to Gardell (1996: 4) there were some eight million Muslims in the United States by the early 90s. Today there are more than 1,200 mosques of all sizes located throughout the United States (ibid.).

The vast bulk of slaves retained an indigenous African belief system. Due to Christian influence slaves were discouraged from practicing Islam and these indigenous religions. Lacking institutions by which to maintain Islam, by 1830 the majority had lost their belief in Islam (White Jr. 2001). At the same time many Christian Churches chose to retain a white identity barring 'black' and 'red' people from their congregations. Consequently, by the 1780's a specifically black (in fact incorporating people of both African and Native American descent) church had developed, particularly in South Carolina. Some of the ministers had been part of the Black Loyalists, who responded to British promises for freedom if they fought against the North American revolutionaries. As a consequence George Liele fled Savannah following the British withdrawal and founded a black Baptist church in Jamaica. Others like David George and John Marrant went to Nova Scotia where there was a large settlement of Black Loyalists (Minges 2000). Yet others, such as the muslim Balali, 'who managed a plantation with some five hundred slaves on the Georgia

island of Sapelo', actually 'led eighty armed slaves in successfully defending the island against a British attack in the War of 1812' (Segal 2001: 225).

The abolition of slavery was not so much accompanied by a relaxation of racism as by its intensification. The institution of slavery created a role for the African or their African American offspring. With the abolition of slavery (initially in New England) came a reluctance by the 'white community' and their institutions to allow a free 'black community' to flourish. Both overtly racist and more hidden racist measures were introduced to curb the free movement of black people (Melish 1998). As the legal/economic institutionalisation of slavery was removed, new restrictions based upon a hardening conception of race came to confine the activities of free blacks. Indeed free blacks were generally excluded from growing industrialisation current then.

In Nova Scotia, Canada there were in the summer of 1784 what can be described as the first race riots in Shelburne. The entire black population of Shelburne, numbering several hundred, were driven out by unemployed white Loyalist ex-soldiers. The incident, which sparked this off, was religious: the black Baptist minister, David George had baptised a white woman. However, the underlying economic reasons soon asserted themselves as the rioters went on in an attempt to lynch Benjamin Marston, the chief surveyor who they held responsible for delays in granting them land. Here the pogrom of Black Loyalists, many of whom competed for work with the White Loyalists, accompanied an assault on the authorities whose delays in handing out land affected ex-soldiers both black and white. From the account of white people being baptised in a black church, the pogrom underlines how the rioters' goal of ensuring land settlement was accompanied by a desire to reassert a distinction between themselves as whites and the impoverished Black Loyalists<sup>1</sup>.

In the same period there was in 1786 what appears to be the first anti-racist demonstration when London's black population protested proposals to introduce laws to expel black people from England, copying what had already been done in France. The resistance to these attacks on free black 'communities' was accompanied by the growth of Christian sentiment in these communities. As in England the acquisition of Christianity was accompanied by the acquisition of literacy. Trevelyan has illustrated how the geographic spread of the Peasant's Revolt paralleled the spread of Lollardry in the fourteenth century (Trevelyan 1908).

The question of slavery came to dominate US political life in the first half of the nineteenth century. Firstly, as to whether slavery would be permitted in the new territories, which were being turned into new states to be admitted to the USA. But in many ways this was fuelled by a conflict within the white population with the concern that slave labour would drive out free labour as had happened across the Caribbean and to a certain extent in the southern state of the USA. The American Civil War eventually precipitated by radicals like John Brown whose raid on Harper's Ferry indicated their despair that the US state apparatus would respond to popular discontent. Indeed even once the US state apparatus had engaged in warfare, many of the leading generals showed a marked disinterest in fighting, whereas radical republicans who had volunteered to fill the lower ranks of the army, and occasionally took field command, served to provide the real dynamism of the invasion of the south.

The successful conclusion of the war swiftly led to the abolition of slavery in North America and was followed by an intense struggle in the conquered South as former slaves asserted themselves socially, politically and economically and plantation owners tried to ensure that the land they owned retained its social quality as capital by subordinating black labour to work it for them. The US Army by asserting their rights of ownership prevented the former slaves from

taking over the land. This was a period when former slaves, many of whom had been manual workers, occupied political positions in a way only elsewhere realised in the Paris Commune. Nevertheless the old Slave-owning elite organised the Ku Klux Klan, established in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1866. Most of its leaders were former members of the Confederate Army. Any attempt to form 'black protection groups such as trade unions was quickly dealt with' (Teaching History Online). Offering less wealthy whites, 'racial supremacy', with all its real and imagined benefits it served to restrict the social opportunities to the newly freed slaves who were forced back to the plantations under disadvantageous conditions.

## **Racism modernised**

Once the North had achieved its overall goal of submitting the South to northern economic dictates, defence of the liberated black people and their radical allies was perceived as superfluous sentimentality. Violence and Jim Crow laws became the order of the day without the need for such a specific form of organised violence as provided by the Ku Klux Klan. Nevertheless alongside the terror of everyday life, occasionally mass violence broke out, e.g. as in Wilmington in 1898. Faced with a Republican-Populist fusion gaining elected control of municipal and statewide institutions in North Carolina, the Democratic Party organised the Red Shirts as a terror gang to intimidate black voters. This culminated in a Democratic coup carried out by about 2,000 white Supremacists. After various gun battles which left about twenty African Americans dead, the Republican Mayor and Aldermen were forced to resign. Wilmington had been a town that had a black majority, including a substantial black middle class. By 1900 it had a white majority<sup>2</sup>. The Republican US government did nothing about this Democratic Party coup d'état.

It was precisely this erasure of a black middle class, which fuelled Booker T. Washington's approach to racial uplift. Rather than just creating a middle class to be repeatedly stomped into the ground, Washington lowered his sights in the hope of achieving some tangible goals. Faced with terror, he became quiescent focussing on developing technical skills that would allow some slight opportunities for former slaves and their children to become skilled workers. It has been suggested that he was, in fact, purveyor of more radical politics, which he hid from his rich white benefactors for fear of losing their support. This certainly explains his writing style and media representational techniques. Carla Willard (2001: 629) suggests:

... narrative brevity helped him skirt the inflammatory phrase ... his stories also fascinated like advertisements. Admiring audiences flocked to his stories from so many disparate ideological positions that it is hard to believe that they read from the same script ... [Washington's] anecdotal style increased the attractiveness and saleability of his stories, and through his stories, the exposure and funding of his entire project of black uplift.

In other words 'Washington spoke less<sup>3</sup> not only to leap over troubled social terrain but also to engage further the disparate social and political positions of his readers' (Willard 2001: 632).

However, in 1915 the Ku Klux Klan was reformed by William J. Simmons, 'a preacher influenced by Thomas Dixon's book, *The Ku Klux Klan* (1905) and the film of the book, *Birth of a Nation* directed by D.W. Griffith' (Ibid.). The oppression became so fierce that even someone as pliant as Booker T. Washington felt obliged to intervene with more urgency. He began in late life

to speak out 'in surprisingly direct terms against Jim Crow, lynching, and D.W. Griffith's sordidly successful film of 1915, *The Birth of a Nation*' (Willard 2001: 632). By 1925 Ku Klux Klan membership reached a staggering 4,000,000. According to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 'between 1900 to 1930 ... blacks were lynched on an average of every other day' (White Jr. 2001: 15). In addition the KKK acted as strike breakers. Jim Crow laws were widespread and the 'black servicemen who returned to America after World War I found that they frequently had been treated better in European countries than they were in their own home' (Gudel and Duckworth 1986).

Although the Great Migration of Southern blacks to northern cities like Chicago, New York and Detroit led to slight economic improvement, this trend reversed itself 'after [World war I], and frustration, anxiety and discontent arose' (Religious Movements website 2000).

In this period we see the experience of Wilmington 1898 repeated in Tulsa in 1921. James R. Allen (2001) describes how 'about 1200 buildings, including 23 churches, [were] burned, bombed, or looted, and as many as 300 people [were] shot, burned alive, or dragged behind cars.' The Tulsa police actually deputized members of the Ku Klux Klan to carry out the punishments. Allen suggests, '[The Ku Klux Klan] became strong after the collapse of the Oklahoma Socialist Party. Previously the strongest group in the area.' Whereas the 1917 Race Riots in East St Louis had been a pogrom leading to the death of over 300 following the use of black strike breakers, the Chicago race riot arose due to a dispute over black-white neighbourhood boundaries. However the climax of the Tulsa Pogrom was the sacking of what was regarded as the 'black Wall Street'. As I. Marc Carlson has indicated this riot went beyond an armed brawl to become a veritable 'organized urban warfare.' Around 1913 and within this context of institutionalised racism, the deradicalization of the black church, proletarian mobility and intense capitalist development we find the first recorded 'assertive Muslim presence' (Segal 2001: 225).

## **2) Recent Origins of the Nation of Islam**

### **Economic and cultural influences**

If Washington D.C. can be called its diplomatic capital and New York its financial nerve centre, then the Nation of Islam's power-base is located in Chicago. The 'Windy City' was, after all, founded by Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, a black man who came to the Mississippi Valley with French explorers and constructed the first building on the site that developed into Chicago. The Chicago of the 1920s was in many ways a perfect breeding ground for reactionary movements. Gareth Canaan (2001: 148) notes:

for Chicago's black workers, the economic and living conditions were already in decline during the 1920s...as severe as the Great Depression was, it only further exacerbated pre-existing conditions within the black community ... African American women in Chicago enjoyed increased job opportunities between 1910 and 1920 but, unlike black women in other northern cities, were largely shut out of industry ... [However] as wartime production in industry contracted, African-American workers were fired and replaced by whites who had returned from the war and needed employment.

The depiction of the 1920s Chicago as a booming and prosperous city is, therefore, highly exaggerated. Again according to Canaan (2001: 164) ‘an estimated 34.5 to 50.1 per cent of urban families lived under the poverty line...the unemployment rate of industrial workers [averaged] 12.95 per cent between 1921 and 1926.’

Davies (1988: 20) has convincingly argued that the rapid industrialization of cities such as Chicago in the nineteenth century tended to fragment rather than unify the proletariat (unlike industrialization in Western Europe). He cites three centrifugal forces acting to pull the American working class apart. First, in these areas industrialization arose,

without those deep roots in the artisanal resistance to industrialism which many historians have stressed as a determining factor in the formation of militant unionism and working class consciousness...it was this expanding urban-industrial frontier...with its constantly replenished opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurial accumulation, that provided material sustenance for the petty-bourgeois ideologies of individual mobility that gripped the minds of so many American workers (Davies 1988: 20).

The second centrifugal influence was the Yankee vs. immigrant conflict that emerged after the ‘arrival of several million impoverished Irish and German laborers who came in a flood (sic) after the European crop failures of the 1840s’ (ibid. p 21).

To this was added cultural difference and religious tensions that American society cemented, making proletarian unity more untenable. Finally, there was the problem of racism and slavery. ‘As Tocqueville observed’, writes Davies about the 1850s,

the antebellum North was, if anything, more poisonously anti-Black than the South... Although segments of the native white working class, especially in New England, eventually embraced Abolitionism, they remained a minority whose opposition to slavery was most often framed within a pietistic religious ideology, rather than within a clear political analysis of the relationship between capitalism and slavery (ibid).

After the Draft Riot of 1863, which began as a struggle against the ‘silk-stocking rich’ and ended up as an anti-black pogrom, even the Irish proletariat severed their links with the despised black proletariat.

It is true that World War II provided some black proletarians entrance to hitherto inaccessible areas of the manufacturing sector. In fact, ‘the shortage of labor led to the uneven integration of Afro-Americans into more skilled positions; but, at war’s end, most still held unskilled positions’ (Robinson 2001: 36). Many more languished in jails or remained unemployed.

### **Ideological influences**

The Nation’s more recent ideological origins should be traced to a number of early twentieth century influences. Shortly before World War I, two black movements were founded: the ‘Moorish Science Temple of America’ established in 1913 by Timothy Drew and the ‘Universal Negro Improvement Association’ founded in 1914 by Marcus Garvey. Freemasonry, Gnosticism, and the Islamic creeds of Ismailiyya, Ahmadiyya and Sufism influenced the Moors. Members were

'advised to respect the inequalities of social stratification' (Gardell 1966: 44). Garvey was a printer by trade, who had led an unsuccessful strike in his youth at Kingston. The experience of defeat 'imbued him with a lifelong scepticism regarding unionism and class struggle' (Gardell 1996: 23). He also believed, 'potentially, every white man is a Klansman, as far as the Negro in competition with whites socially, economically and politically is concerned, and there is no use lying about it' (Gardell 1996: 272). As E. Franklin Frazier has explained:

Garvey not only promised the despised Negro a paradise on earth, but he made the Negro an important person in his immediate environment. He invented honors and social distinctions and converted every social invention to his use in his effort to make his followers important. While everyone was not a 'knight or sir', all his followers were fellow-men of the Negro race ... The women were organized into black Cross Nurses and the men became uniformed members of the vanguard of the great African army (Quoted in Marable 1998: 167).

Garvey's metaphysical belief 'in a pure black race just as [...] all self-respecting whites believe in a pure white race' will be picked up by the NOI eventually (Gardell 1996: 272).

The man who blended Noble Drew Ali and Marcus Garvey with a smattering of Islam was a door-to-door rug salesman and convicted drug dealer called Wallace Dodd Ford. By this stage in the 1930s, the memory of Islam may have been alive amongst children of early slaves but 'we encounter [mostly] a memory, not a living faith' (Gardell 1996: 35). Palmer takes up the story:

Upon Ford's 1929 release from California's San Quintin Prison, he moved to Detroit to start a new life. Ford used a number of names, including Wali Farad and Master Fard and claimed to be from Mecca, Arabia. Being that Ford's parentage was a mixture of white and South Pacific Maori, he used his skin color and his prison con skills to pass himself off to blacks as a 'mystic' and a 'prophet' from the Middle East...Among his first students was an unemployed Georgia migrant worker, Elijah Poole, who Ford renamed 'Elijah Muhammad'. In later years, Ford disappeared and Elijah assumed leadership of the NOI which he held until his death in 1975.

Ford (or Noble Drew Ali as he was known to the faithful) disappeared in mysterious circumstances. Some allege he was murdered by the family of a young girl whom he had raped, whilst others maintain he was the victim of foul play by the federal state. Elijah Muhammad's 'explanation' for his master's disappearance was simpler: 'We believe that Allah (God) appeared in the person of Master W. Fard Muhammad, July, 1930 — the long awaited 'Messiah' of the Christians and the 'Mahdi' of the Muslims' (Elijah Muhammad 1965). He has ascended back into heaven but, lest the faithful grow anxious, it was alleged that he would return at Armageddon to proclaim the total victory of the black man over the white man. Elijah Muhammad was not very popular with certain sections of the Nation. His life was threatened by rivals from Temple No. 2 in Chicago, causing him to flee to Milwaukee in 1935 (Bush: 1999: 142). He returned in 1942 to assume leadership of the national office in Chicago. His imprisonment for refusing to be drafted, 'imparted to Elijah Muhammad a sense of martyrdom, which reinforced his claim of leadership. He returned to Chicago in 1946, after his release from prison as undisputed leader of the nation of Islam' (Bush 1999: 143).

The essential element in a critique of the Nation of Islam is to grasp its adherents as Pendulum-junkies. Its founding fathers discovered and at times invented ideological bi-polarities around which the strategy of the movement could be organized. Like Gestalt psychologists configuration

and presentation is privileged over substance. This then creates the illusion of motion with which the rank-and-file are mesmerized.

The repetitive toing-and-froing of the pendulum serves to imbue the flock with a crass activism, suppressing doubt by promoting dynamic disorientation. At first it proves to be an indispensable party-building device, but the pendulum has a nasty side effect. Once it reaches critical mass, it acquires a mind of its own, disowning the Prime Mover and transforming whoever strays in its path into dependent junkies. The fact that Farrakhan has managed to exert his power over violent faction fighting and contending interest groups within the Nation is testimony to his personnel management skills. For example, whenever he was scheduled to speak 'all Muslims from a five-hundred-mile radius were instructed to be there for security', but in reality '[they were encouraged to attend] as an audience against a poor showing' (White Jr. 2001) and whenever a minister became too popular with members, an excuse was found to demote him.

Some clown of a founding father must have been over-dosing on Plato's *Republic* when the Nation's bedrock was being laid. For the division of the Muslim commonwealth into the three classes, gold, silver and iron (Ministers, Fruits of Islam, and rank-and-filers), the notion of a 'necessary lie' as mythic-glue binding individuals to their philosopher-king, the proto-eugenic policy of filtering the defective and the prohibition on innovation in doctrinal matters, fit a pattern ill too common in totalitarian dystopias. For a section of the proletariat that experiences the alienation of American society more than most, the Nation's assertion that black people are angelic gods is a comforting sop. As bell hooks has correctly observed:

When people focus on the white media's obsession with Louis Farrakhan, they think the media hate Farrakhan so much. But they don't hate him. They love him. One of the reason's why they love him is that he's totally pro-capitalist. There is a tremendous overlap in the values of a Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam and the values of the white, Christian right (bell hooks interviewed in *Z Magazine*).

In March 1990 Farrakhan appeared on 'The Phil Donahue show' and after the Million Man March, he was invited on 'Larry King Live' (see Robinson 2001: 123). The March itself was covered by CNN in its entirety. Gardell (1996: 140) reports, 'as of September 1995, Minister Farrakhan could be heard on forty-eight different radio stations and seen on at least ninety-nine different television channels across the United States.' The Nation is now an official part of the establishment. That is the reason George W. Bush in 2000, while he was still the Texas governor decided, 'under his charitable choice plan, the Nation of Islam would be able to provide various social services using tax dollars' (PR Newswire, Feb 1, 2000). This was part of Bush's overall plan to cut welfare payment and turn faith-based organizations into primary providers of social services. Music to the ears of Farrakhan who has been lecturing about 'self-improvement' and 'economic independence' for years, in much the same way various Muslim organizations establish a welfare network around the mosque in order to strengthen their political status.

In 1991 NOI launched the Three Year Economic Savings Plan, in order to catalyse the process of capital accumulation. Members were asked to donate \$10 a month. 'Farrakhan suggests', writes Gardell (1996: 32), 'that the government should support the Three Year plan by allowing blacks to direct 15 percent of their taxes to the NOI savings program.'

### 3) This Asabiyya Ain't Big Enough for the Both of Us!

#### From asabiyya to umma

Asabiyya, Ibn Khaldun contended cryptically, 'is a function of lineage affiliation or something that fulfils the role of such affiliation' — a kind of group solidarity maintained by a dominant element with a mandate to coerce. It could be viewed as a socio-economic structure based on vassal relations marking the transition from an egalitarian tribal system to class society.

The Nation of Islam's early phase of development (circa 1930–1960) was characterized by the search for asabiyya through a nation-building program in what was often a hostile climate. The crash of 1929 had hit black capital just as severely as the larger white capital it depended on. In this context religious values were only of secondary importance to the extent that they fostered and strengthened asabiyya. Black Muslim leaders consistently called for a separate state, either on US soil or elsewhere, despite realizing that there was no realistic chance of being granted one. There was, for instance, the project advocated by the National Movement for the Establishment of the Forty-Ninth State. This group of black nationalists 'argued that because they did not receive the promised forty acres and a mule in the nineteenth century, they should now receive a separate state from the government' (White Jr. 2001). This was an opening salvo in a protracted negotiation over compensation for slavery that is still raging today. Apart from its obvious monetary benefits, the quest acts as Holy Grail and an emblematic desire for independence from the white Devil. It is claimed that Fard successfully recruited 8,000 followers into his Lost-Found Nation of Islam between 1930 to 1934 alone.

In *The Theology of Time*, a work which by contrast makes Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Khomeini's *Secrets Revealed* appear monumentally coherent, the Honourable space-cadet Elijah Muhammad uses a combination of messianic, chiliastic and numerological myths to forge a new historical identity for black Americans. The prophet Muhammad (the real one!) is dismissively referred to as 'white' (!); the black Stone of Kaa'ba as proof that people will one day bow to the real black Man, Elijah; a 30 million black army deemed sufficient to help the chosen one 'rule the whole world'; Africans are blessed as special and chastised as uncivilized in the same paragraph; the 'mad scientist', Yakub4 (contradictorily referred to as 'a devil' and 'another god') is alleged to have grafted devils (the white race) from the black Man 6,600 years ago (!); in a direct reversal of white racism, Elijah Muhammad refers to an even younger group called 'the monkey family, who were created from white people as they tried to graft themselves back to the black nation. A few got as far as what you call a gorilla' (Elijah Muhammad 1965); the black people have a more ancient origin, in fact they are '66 trillion years from the moon'!

The honourable one assures us that women are not all fools and their function viewed as comforters of men, although '[men] have more powerful brains than she because we were made to rule' (ibid.); Islam is perceived as black Man's equivalent of white masonry ('masons who have reached siren degrees as 32<sup>nd</sup> or 33<sup>rd</sup> are called Moslem Shriners); the 'Hindu' (sic) Vietnamese and Christian Americans fighting each other condemned as equally godless and condemned to physical annihilation ('I wish that My God would allow me to get one of these nuclear bombs and one of these planes... I would show you how long they would be here...'); following Nobel Drew Ali and preceding Khomeini by decades, America is referred to as the 'Great Satan'; and onwards and upwards into a crescendo of bird-brained absurdity.

This absurd ideology served to augment the spatial exclusivity of Muslim temples by providing the membership with, appropriate psychological armour in their daily struggle against American alienation. The Nation's party builders had a great deal of material to work with, after all the Christian church was probably the most segregated institution in the country. One common recruitment technique during the heyday of the civil rights movement was 'to use clippings from newspapers showing blacks being turned away from white churches or of white Christian ministers openly advocating segregation' (Gudel & Duckworth, *ibid.*).

This alienation was actively encouraged by the white judiciary at least since 1898 when in a landmark ruling the railroad companies were given the go ahead to segregate their workforce along racial lines. This institutionalised racism allowed up and coming bourgeois blacks to set up enclosures within which primitive accumulation of (black) capital could shield itself from unwelcome competition. Once the Nation's religious credentials were constitutionally verified, their temples and schools could become tax-exempt. In addition, each member is obliged to give a tenth of his earnings to the temple, although White Jr. (2001: 59) claims as much as a third of members' salaries go to the Nation.

Where the Moorish Science Temple were content to play home-spun economics, indulging in the simple commodity production of heating oil, bath compounds, minerals, and tonics, the Nation laid the foundation of more ambitious schemes, setting up restaurants, bazaars, farms, bakeries, clothes stores, theatres, rallies and a regular newspaper network. According to Robinson (2001: 40) the Nation 'even purchased a bank.' And while the former appropriated a Moorish identity as a legal method of resisting slavery, the latter (temporarily) spurned full US citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

The early 60s heralded a Rubicon. By this time enough *asabiyya* had been stored in the organization's battery cells to last it a lifetime. This primitive accumulation of capital was achieved through the 'super-exploitation' of black workers. Robinson (2001: 42) reports how many members who worked 'long hours in the restaurants and bakeries didn't get paid for all the time they worked.' Moreover, 'with the religious ban on wastefulness and extravagant pleasures, investment of accumulated capital was regularized and modern 'rational' capitalism became a reality' (Gardell 1996: 115). However, the nation's isolationism was proving counter-productive and capital accumulation slowing down. Individuals like Malcolm X were beginning to find the constraints of fake humility and political non-intervention unbearable, and the American left's influence in Harlem was waning. At his behest, and despite Elijah Muhammad's initial objections the nation co-operated with a sympathetic producer who made an hour long documentary called *The Hate That hate produced* about the organization. Membership doubled from an estimated base 40,000 (according to C. Eric Lincoln) as a result of the broadcast. The influx of university-educated blacks soon began demanding change and modernization. The switch from *asabiyya* to *umma* (the false universal Islamic community) was inaugurated through a number of highly publicized politico-spiritual pilgrimages.

## 4) Mecca Carlo or Bust!

### Entrenchment and expansion

In the same way that the *asabiyya/umma* dichotomy can only be fully understood within the wider context of the periodical American oscillation between isolationism and expansionism, the romanticized spiritual journey of Muslim leaders requires a larger historical canvass.

'Islam is permeated with nostalgia for departure', writes an American scholar (P. L. Wilson). This is true so long as one does not lose touch with the material source of this nostalgia: the Bedouin who fought enclosures and resisted Islamic urbanization; the annual de-paganization of Mecca/Medina (Hajj) as a platform for kick-starting the mercantile economy; the long voyages abroad in search of booty and imperial conquest; the Sufi wandering away from the epicentres of Islamic corruption; and, finally pilgrimage to exotic lands as a tactic of legitimising one's authority within a sect and against political rivals. All these earthly methods of accumulating wealth and power represent the real basis of the idealistic notion of 'nostalgia' in Islamic literature.

When Ibn Battuta, the famous 14<sup>th</sup> century Muslim traveller, embarked on his voyage of discovery, he used the caravanserai route to cut across invisible borders and the magical Khanegah (Sufi hospice) route to transcend real obstacles.

In imitation the NOI spreads its matrix of mosques across America like so many plastic squats on a monopoly board. Yet the simulated network reminds one more of interlocking chains of McDonald's and YMCAS, catering to the alienated and confused with a menu of spiritual fast food and squeaky beds. At its height, 'the Nation owned farms in three estates, a newspaper that earned annual profits of \$3 million, a Chicago supermarket that cleared \$325,000 on sales of \$1.7 million, a string of small bakeries and cleaners, over 40 Chicago-area rental properties and the controlling interest in the Guaranty Bank and Trust Co. on the South Side' (Steller 1996). During Elijah Muhammad's last Savior's Day convention in 1974, the Nation claimed to have amassed \$75 million and that its corporate empire included 'a trucking firm, farms, restaurants, newspapers, grocery stores, apartment buildings, a fish enterprise, and a fleet of airplanes' (White Jr. 2001: 97).

Since 1982 Farrakhan has coerced members to part with millions of dollars for building a National Centre Complex, school and adult education facility- projects that were never fulfilled. Robinson (2001: 41) underscores the importance to the Nation of separate education: 'By 1974 forty-six cities in the United States had NOI elementary schools. These schools taught fundamentals and doctrine. Boys and girls attended separate classes, if space permitted.' Ironically, the Nation has always been in dire financial difficulties through a mixture of mismanagement and corruption. For instance, it is often very hard to locate temples because they must constantly change address due to evictions for unpaid bills.

Taking another leaf out of Sufi techniques of pedagogy, the Fruits of Islam are put through an arduous and painful initiation ceremony. They are instructed to do things that often seem bizarre and illogical. For instance, one ex-member had to post bulletins in wind-chill temperatures of minus 45 degrees (White Jr. 2001: 73). Giving financial support to the coffers of the Nation could easily translate into personal bankruptcy. The goal is to break the spirit of members and remould them in the Nation's image as Sufi initiates have been remoulded for eons by their pirs.

## Tourist warriors of Allah

Every successful pilgrimage to 'the holy lands' (to be understood in the broadest geo-cultural sense) shifts the balance of power within the organization. His 1985 trip to Libya was rewarded with a \$5 million donation from Colonel Qadhafi, which was wasted on a failed venture called POWER (People Organized Working for Economic Rebirth). The promised employment opportunities never materialized and the Clean-n-Fresh beauty products on sale were twice as expensive as rival commodities. Farrakhan's latest tour of the Middle East and Africa undermined his American rivals and promoted the financial conditions for the next phase of capital accumulation. Although he denies being a prophet, he certainly knows how to act as one. The World Friendship Tour of Minister Louis Farrakhan (1996) saw him visit a number of key countries in the Middle East and Africa. Everywhere he had accolades heaped upon him by corrupt politicians whilst his simple-minded rhetoric was completely ignored by a proletariat too savvy to fall for what passes for political discourse in the States. In Syria he was praised by president Hafez al-Asad for his piety and virtue (sic). The Grand Mufti of Syria offered a cultural treaty, including hundreds of scholarships for young men and women from the U.S. at the Islamic Call Society Academy in Damascus (Askia Muhammad 1997).

In Iran, Farrakhan went through the ritual of laying a wreath at the tomb of the fascist Khomeini with the following panegyrics: 'Allah sent us Imam Khomeini to guide and lead the Iranian people on the straight path. Iran is now the vanguard of the Islamic revolution sweeping the earth' (ibid.). After a chat with Saddam Hussein and Necmettin Erbakan (the Turkish leader of what used to be called the 'Welfare Party'), Farrakhan's declarations became even more outlandish. In Malaysia he seemed to have completely lost the plot: 'America says she's the only superpower left...but she better look again. Islam is the next world superpower, and you will be the leaders of that world'.

The disciplining of Muslim proletarians employed by the Nation's temples (employment guilds combining the functions of civil and political societies) through starvation wages was ideal preparation for extending trade. This disciplining sometimes takes the form of a spectacle, which has been described as a 'mixture of Baptist revival tent service and a criminal hearing' (White Jr., 2001: 86). The end result is to have a trouble free workforce who 'works for no one but Allah'. One member of the Nation has had the decency to call this set up by its proper name: 'we became the black Mafia!' (Quoted in white Jr., ibid., p 146).

The capital can be accumulated unhindered through Japanese fish trawlers importing South American fish or thousands of sheep and cattle shifted across the country using a regiment of trucks and planes.<sup>6</sup> This bosses' paradise is only occasionally threatened with workers' revolt. When the Nation established its Blue Seas Whiting Fish Company, 'members were expected to buy thousands of pounds yearly' in order to keep it profitable. However, 'eventually members refused to buy the fish. Because of this policy, Blue Seas failed as a money enterprise. In 1991 the company filed for bankruptcy' (Whit Jr.: 2001: 92).

Throughout Ibn Battuta's journey doors would open and obstacles cleared from his path almost as if an angel had taken permanent residence on his shoulder. The trick, of course, was to be a Sufi initiate and know all the passwords. American black leaders have always been wise to this. Noble Drew Ali, founder of the Moorish Science Temple, was a mason, as was Elijah Muhammad. In 1775 'fifteen Negroes were initiated into a British lodge of freemasons, at Boston. After the

Revolution, the white American masons refused their Negro brothers to set up a lodge, but the Negroes applied directly to the Grand lodge of England and were immediately granted a charter'.<sup>7</sup>

Such attitudes fuelled separatist tendencies and strengthened the Nation's perception of the whole of America as jahaliyeh (here land of ignorance). Consequently, unlike Martin Luther King and the NAACP, the Nation organized in the North and won many converts. The uneven spread of bigotry facing blacks required a flexible stratagem, hence a new double-headed monster was concocted: racism and racialism. The pendulum began swinging once more.

## 5) The Fable of the Two Lions

### Racism/racialism

Louis E. Lomax (1963) has an amusing tale to tell:

I once debated with Malcolm X on TV in Los Angeles... As we were leaving the studio, we were greeted by several white (sic) students, Moslems from Persia, who complained to Malcolm that they had attempted to visit Elijah Muhammad's temples and were refused entry because they were white-eyed devils. Malcolm glossed the matter over: 'Let's look at it this way,' he told the Persians, 'if a lion is in a cage, his roar will be different from the roar of the lion who is in the forest. That's why you couldn't get in our temples. But both the lion in the forest and the lion in the cage are lions. That is what matters. Lions love lions: they hate leopards.'

Drew Ali was a lax racist, believing in the separate development and destiny of black people whilst permitting asians (Amerindians, Chinese, Japanese, and even white Celts and Persians) to join the Moorish Science Temple. Elijah Muhammad, as already indicated, a strict racist espoused the superiority of blacks over all others. Malcolm X who in his conformist phase swung both ways, slowly evolved towards a more tolerant position, splitting with his mentor. Uncle Louis, perhaps the most opportunistic of the Nation's leaders, remains an unreconstituted racist who actively encourages political alliance with other minorities so long as his position as supreme boss is not threatened. Segal believes that while all previous leaders of the NOI were prejudiced, to some extent, 'it was under the leadership of Farrakhan...that the Nation of Islam took to demonising the Jews with invective fervor. Jews were accused of having injected black babies with the AIDS virus...' (Segal 2001: 235).

Gardell (1996: 246-252) has demonstrated some of the complexities in US Black-Jewish relations over the years:

The first Jews to arrive in the New World in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries adhered to a conservative line of thinking and kept a low or apolitical profile...Starting in the 1880s, this pattern began to change with the influx of working class socialist Jews from Russia and eastern Europe.

Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century 'Jews were there to form a coalition with blacks in a fight for common causes' (Gardell 1996: 247). Since the NOI does not encourage a class analysis it is easy to ignore the plight of Jewish proletarians and to highlight those Jewish-Americans who stand in an exploitative relationship vis-à-vis black proletarians. We are talking about slumlords,

ghetto store-owners, etc., who are at times the only exploiters that ghettoised blacks come into direct contact with. Reactionary Black and Jewish racists have been successful in driving a wedge between these two potentially radical sections of the US proletariat.

For instance, when a black reporter, Milton Coleman, reported Jesse Jackson's anti-Semite jibe about 'hymie-town' (New York)<sup>8</sup>, he was branded as an Uncle Tom and race traitor by Farrakhan who urged the black community to ostracize him:

What do we do with Coleman? At this point, no physical harm. But for now, I'm going to get every church in Washington, D.C., to put him out ... One day soon, we will punish you with death. You say when is that? In sufficient time, we will come to power right inside this country ... This is a fitting punishment for dogs (quoted in White Jr., *ibid*, p 103).

This harked back to some of his inflammatory remarks against Malcolm X: 'Only those who wish to be led to hell or to their doom will follow Malcolm. The die is set, and Malcolm shall not escape ... such a man as Malcolm is worthy of death...' (Muhammad Speaks, 10 November 1964).<sup>9</sup>

Farrakhan then went on to call Hitler 'a great leader', call Judaism a 'dirty' religion, publish the racist forgery *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and ultimately to challenge the authenticity of the Holocaust. Today the *Final Call* newspaper carries similar denial claims regarding Saddam Hussein's gassing of the Kurds.

Another notorious book *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews* was written by the Nation's own 'scholars'. Using selective texts it blames,

conversos as the driving force behind New World Exploitation, and, by extrapolation, slavery. In its simplistic overview, anybody who had anything to do with Atlantic maritime commerce or New World colonization was either a Jew or a conversos (Leinweber 2001).

The book fails to point out the racism that drove so many Jews to engage in usury or commerce or the inconvenient fact that during the Medieval Era, Jews themselves were often captured and sold into slavery. By sleight of hand, terms such as 'Dutch' and 'Jewish' become veritable synonyms, so that the establishment of the Great Bank of Amsterdam in 1609 can be perceived as part of a Jewish bid for world domination. Some prestigious Afro-American scholars such as Tony Martin and Professor Leonard Jeffries jumped on Farrakhan's racist bandwagon. According to Segal (2001: 238) the 'Jewish involvement in the Islamic black slave trade was relatively minor as well as intermittent'. And Henry Louis Gates Jr., head of the African-American Studies department at Harvard University, has concluded: 'American Jewish merchants accounted for less than two per cent of all the African slaves traders imported into the New World...all the Jewish slave traders combined bought and sold fewer slaves than the single gentile firm of Franklin and Armfield' (quoted in Segal, *ibid*).

In 1993, Khallid Muhammad, Farrakhan's alleged flame-thrower went even further during a speech at Kean College, New Jersey:

Everybody always talks about Hitler exterminating six million Jews...But doesn't anybody ever ask what they did to Hitler? They went there, in Germany, the way they do everywhere they go, and they supplanted, they usurped, they turned around Germany and a German, in his own country, would have to go to a Jew to get money.

Then with reference to South Africa, borrowing language from a western, he continued:

... we give him [whites] 24 hours to get out of town by sundown...if he won't ... we kill everything white that ain't right in South Africa. We kill the women, we kill the children. We kill the babies. We kill the blind, we kill the crippled, we kill'em all. We kill the faggot, we kill the lesbian, we'll kill them all ... Why kill the babies? ... Because they gonna grow up one day to oppress our babies ... Why kill the women? ... Because they are the military or the army's manufacturing center. They lay on their back and reinforcement roll out between their legs (quoted in White Jr., *ibid.*, p 120).

Such unrestrained bigotry throughout the history of the Nation has manipulated politically naïve blacks to wage holy wars against all whites irrespective of their class affiliations. One such case was the infamous 'Zebra Killings' in San Francisco during late 1973 and early 1974. According to White Jr. (2001: 28) the four murderers claimed to be following the teachings of the Lost Found Nation of Islam. Calling themselves the Death Angeles they managed to decapitate fifteen victims and permanently injure many more before capture. The court proceedings exposed that the local minister of Islam had hired attorneys for the convicted men. When a serial killer called Wayne Williams murdered twenty-six black babies in Atlanta, Georgia, Farrakhan's responded with predictable bravado: 'You better start finding the killer of our babies or some of your white babies will begin to die'.

Today Farrakhan does not display the honest naiveté of his youth quite so cavalierly. But there was a time when he was less coy. At a rally for Angela Davis, he asserted:

Black supremacy was supposed to be something evil. Supremacy means to be top, to be the Supreme Ruler. Somebody has to be supreme, white folks. You've been supreme for 6000 years. What's wrong with black supremacy? It's our day now! And some foolish brother will say, 'Black supremacy is just as bad as white supremacy'. How would you know? You never lived under black Rule.

In April 1994 in another typical remark he warns: 'I am going to be like a pit bull. That is the way I'm going to be against the Jews. I am going to bite the tail of the honkies'.

Jason Glenn (1996) has correctly pointed out that Farrakhan, despite his rhetoric and dalliance with Middle Eastern/African identity politics is a decidedly Western phenomenon:

Why is America unable and unwilling to deal with Farrakhan? Because he thinks exactly as America does. America is unable to deal with Farrakhan because he is an orthodox Western thinker. To deal with Farrakhan, America would have to deal with itself.

If our thesis that the nation of Islam combines four related tendencies, namely black Nationalism, religious beliefs, cult-worship and gang activity is correct, then the success of the Nation should be seen in the context of similar North American movements.<sup>10</sup>

### **Biological determinism**

What unites the Nation's conception of race with white racists is pseudo-scientific biological determinism that only occasionally requires the support of its lesser twin, cultural determinism.

This was a crucial element in a host of half-baked ideas thrown haphazardly into the Nation's ideological melting pot. Robinson (2001: 35) has shown how, 'in terms of ideas and practice, Muhammad mixed Horatio Alger themes of uplift, racial determinism, and gender subordination, with an apolitical millenarianism.' Farrakhan's bigotry against homosexuals seems a confused mixture of both forms of determinism:

... I think that when you warehouse black men in prisons and they have a sexual drive that is being titillated by the lyrics and by the cultural degeneracy that pervades America today, this sexual need is sometimes filled with activity that God disapproved of (Meet the press interview, 10/12/1970).

In relationship to AIDS, in line with a whole range of religious reactionaries, Farrakhan welcomes the suffering caused to people as a message from God:

I consider [homosexuality] a problem. Maybe they don't consider it a problem, but AIDS is manifesting that there is a problem somewhere in this kind of social behaviour ... And AIDS is making some people who are promiscuous adopt another extreme posture; they are becoming celibate. So fear is causing people to reassess all kinds of relationships that they are having. I think in the end it will turn out to be something good (Independent Black Leadership in America, p. 46).

In fact, Farrakhan is of the opinion that AIDS is the result of an intentional biological assault on the Central African population: '[They're] not drug users nor are they homosexuals. How did they get AIDS?' (Quoted in Patrick Inniss 2000). All this may seem a tad unsophisticated but it would be foolish to underestimate its influence on a section of the black male population that feels itself not only inferior to 'white society' but also increasingly to black women. Norm R. Allen, Jr. (1995) has written:

Any woman who advocates equality between the sexes is accused of being a feminist, or worse. A woman is expected to 'get with the program' or risk being branded as a rabble rouser and traitor to the cause. Women are expected to submit to men, who supposedly need such submission to restore their long-lost manhood. It should therefore not be surprising that not a single RBN [Reactionary Black Nationalist] has come out in opposition to female genital mutilation (FGM), euphemistically referred to as 'female circumcision.'

Thus attacks on gays and women are part of the same patriarchal strategy of dominance. Muhammad would write: 'The woman is man's field to reproduce his nation' (Muhammad 1965: 64). In line with all reactionaries he considered control over the reproduction of labour power to be a crucial mechanism of discipline and moralistic control, which explains his views on abortion: 'using birth control for a social purpose is a sin.' Malcolm X, that icon of 'progressive' and 'radical' politics for most of the Leninist left, shared similar views: 'a woman's true nature is to be weak ... [man] must control her if he expects to get her respect' (Malcolm X 1965: 226). These were not mere off-the-cuff statements. They constituted practice. As Robinson (2001: 42) demonstrates, 'Men and women were separated in places of worship. Men dominated the leadership of the organization.' Girls were taught 'not to use profanity and not to raise their voice' and the 'proper bodily posture' to go with their status as the dominated sex (ibid.).

## 6) The (Odious) Charms of Nationalism

### **Not all fascists wear shiny boots, you know!**

At this stage a brief trawl through the murky waters of nationalistic pacts may prove instructive in predicting future trends. Garvey, whose 'ideas on the future government were inspired by Aristotle and Plato' (Gardell 1996: 26), began denouncing racial mongrelisation and actively allied himself with the racial philosophy of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. 'Garvey even invited a KKK spokesman to speak at one of his rallies (the speaker received cheers and applause from the black audience, but the U.N.I.A. lost many members as a result of this and other actions)' (Allen, Jr. 1995). By the 1930s he had become sufficiently envious of the success of Fascism to proclaim, following Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia, 'We were the first fascists ... Mussolini copied Fascism from me'.

The NOI was merely following this trend when they held a meeting in 1962 with the American Nazi Party ostensibly to discuss partitioning the United States between blacks and whites. Malcolm X later admitted that he was ashamed of having been a part of this alliance (ibid.). A week before his assassination he told the press: 'I know for a fact that there is a conspiracy between...the Muslims and the Lincoln Rockwell Nazis and also the Ku Klux Klan' (quoted in Gardell 1996: 273). In fact, Malcolm X comes to denounce Elijah Muhammad as a 'faker' whose 'distorted religious concoction' and 'racist philosophy' has been used to fool the gullible (see Segal 2001: 231). At the NOI's annual Savior's Day in Chicago, George Lincoln Rockwell, the American Nazi was a guest speaker. He stated, 'I believe Elijah Muhammad is the Adolph Hitler of the black man,' and ended his speech by pumping his arm and shouting 'Heil Hitler' (Chicago Free Weekly Reader, April 11, 1986). Moreover, a Ku Klux Klan lawyer by the name of James Venable defended members of the Nation who became entangled with the law in Louisiana. In this context Robinson (2001: 41) has observed: '...Muhammad's orthodoxy looked a great deal like fascism, minus the power.' Gardell's (1996: 283) position is slightly different: 'To a certain extent, it is possible to propose that the NOI represents a Blackamerican Third Positionist ideology.'

Fruits of Islam routinely harass mixed couples in exactly the same fashion as Nazi members of the Ku Klux Klan or the British National Party. By the early 1980s, the Nation of Islam had come to the attention of British Nazis.

The publication of the National Front, a paramilitary organization with a record of racist assaults and attacks against black people in Great Britain, praised Farrakhan as 'God-sent'. The National Front subsequently distributed leaflets defending the Nation of Islam's positions (Marable 1998: 176).

In another revealing episode in 1985, Farrakhan invited,

Tom Metzger, the former Grand Dragon of the California KKK and the head of the white Aryan Resistance, and six other white supremacists to attend an NOI rally. Metzger praised the NOI ... saying 'They speak out against the Jews and the oppressors in Washington.' Metzger donated \$100 to the NOI and said, 'They are the black counterpart to us.' (ibid.).

From inside prison, James Carr (1987) understood this cosy alliance of scoundrels with precision:

The Nazis and the Muslims usually got along. Their philosophies complimented each other; each group was certain of its own racial supremacy and neither was overly aggressive. They left each other alone; each group had its own turf to look out for. This one time, though, some Nazis happened to be standing nearby when a Muslim gave his rap about the white man being the incarnation of evil. The Nazis were forced to move or risk lose face. The cops watched the whole, thing from the catwalk ...

Similarly black nationalists' attitude towards the Jews has traditionally been a mixture of veneration and contempt. This parallels the Left's attitude towards the black proletariat, the contempt shown by Stalinists and the veneration displayed by the usually sober-minded Black Mask group who viewed the black 'lumpenproletariat' as the vanguard of the working class. Their concept of 'Nigger as class' is as erroneous as Abram Leon's depiction of Jews as a 'people-class'.

The imagination of the black slaves feasted on the subversive imagery contained in the Old Testament. Black Judaism acted as a bridgehead between the two. Noble Drew established ties with the Falasha, or Ethiopian Jews.<sup>11</sup> Although the two sets of proletarians have traditionally identified with each other's plight, nationalistic leaders have preferred to stoke the fires of hatred. This is one of Farrakhan's less restrained comments regarding Jews:

And you do with me as is written, but remember that I have warned you that Allah will punish you. You are wicked deceivers of the American people. You are the synagogue of Satan, and you have wrapped your tentacles around the U.S. government, and you are deceiving and sending this nation to hell. But I warn you in the name of Allah, you would be wise to leave me alone. But if you choose to crucify me, know that Allah will crucify you (Saviors' Day Speech, Chicago, 25/2/96).

### **Ideological accommodations**

Garvey, taking a leaf out of Zionism, intended to attract only those Negroes with technical and professional skills to join his New Jerusalem (Non-surplus value producing 'part-white Negroes' need not apply!).<sup>12</sup> The NOI 'points to Israel as an example to emulate' both in terms of nation building and seeking compensation for the Holocaust (Gardell 1996: 256), even though they support Palestinians in the Palestine-Israel conflict. The Nation actively encourages blacks to become skilled electricians, engineers and farmers. Blacks who prefer art subjects are publicly humiliated and derogatory referred to as 'college niggers' (this preference for science subjects over the arts is also evident in Middle Eastern Muslim groups). Most significant of all, Booker T. Washington in his infamous Atlanta Exposition Address '... played upon the Anglo-American xenophobic fears of Catholics and Jews, of Southern Europeans and Slavs, those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits'. This is perhaps the first public expression of a new hybrid of bigotry, what Wilson Jeremiah Moses refers to as 'Anglo-African Chauvinism'.

Washington, as the principle of Tuskegee Institute (Alabama) was instrumental in turning the rural peasantry into skilled wage-salves or 'independent farmers' by setting up training and banking facilities. It is worth remembering that he also thought it his duty to win over other races to the 'American way of life'. Chapter nine of his *Up From Slavery* is an account of his 'first teaching position at Hampton and his experience in acculturating one hundred Plains Indians to 'civilization'' (Willard, *ibid*, p 635). He consciously set out to create a black middle class, setting

up in 1900 the National Negro Business League as a black version of the Chamber of Commerce. Marable (1998: 31) explains Washington's accommodationist 'compromise' in these terms:

... blacks would disavow open agitation for desegregation and the political franchise; in return, they would be permitted to develop their own parallel economic, educational, and social institutions within the framework of expanding Southern capitalism.

This alliance with white capitalists was cemented through attacks on organized labor. He referred to proletarian opposition to capital as foolish and even criminal, meanwhile encouraging black workers to scab on striking white workers. A seminal instance of Washington's anti-working class attitude manifested itself during the Alabama Coal Miners' strike. Marable again:

The Alabama United Mineworkers (UMW) had twelve thousand members, six thousand of them black miners. When U.S. Steel refused to renew the workers' contracts and ordered substantial wage cuts, the miners announced a strike. The state government of Alabama assisted the company by sending convicts to work in the mines. The conflict soon escalated: miners dynamited the homes of non-union strike-breakers; police and company security guards shot and physically assaulted UMW leaders; the governor of Alabama ordered the state militia to destroy the tent camps of black and white strikers; and hundreds of labor leaders were imprisoned (Marable 1998: 32).

During all this, Washington sided with capitalism and discouraged black workers from striking, encouraging them instead to take this ideal opportunity to replace white workers. In order to ingratiate himself with the ruling class and secure his position as the de facto authoritarian leader of the 'black community' he not only attacked other leaders such as Du Bois<sup>13</sup> but went as far as planting spies in their organizations! In a description befitting Farrakhan, Oliver C. Cox has argued that Washington was 'an intercessor between his group and the dominant class...he was given wide publicity as a phenomenal leader [precisely because] he demanded less for the Negro people than that which the ruling class had already conceded' (Quoted in Marable 1998: 35).

In a more recent incident, Al Sharpton used the Crown Heights incident to stoke up anti-Jewish sentiment, organizing a march on a Jewish Sabbath originally destined to end provocatively at the headquarters of the Lubavitcher Jews. Crown Heights is an area in New York. In August 1991 a 'Hasidic Jew ran over two black children. Gavin Cato died after the Hasidic ambulance that arrived was instructed by police to take only the driver to Hospital. Three nights of rioting ensued in which a rabbinical student was stabbed.' Uncle Louis deliberately adds gasoline to fire by routinely accusing 'Jews' of infiltrating black organizations such as NAACP and Martin Luther King's SCLC.<sup>14</sup>

## **7) The Promise of Pain and the Pain of Promise**

### **Populism and the counter-revolution**

The prime function of the NOI is to prevent proletarian rebellion and to keep the US proletariat perennially divided along racial lines. It does this through the institutionalisation of grievance and the spectacular projection of a tightly-scripted Armageddon scenario into an indefinitely

postponed future. This role has gained added significance since the collapse of the U.S. left and various Democratic Party sanctioned Rainbow Coalitions.

The NOI's populist strategy demands a cross-sectional membership. The early phase of development saw the emphasis on recruiting the 'lumpen-proletariat' (addicts, gamblers, beggars, etc.) and unemployed proletarians. In fact, 'Elijah Muhammad and other Muslim leaders had opportunities to recruit incarcerated converts during periods when these leaders were imprisoned for refusing to serve in the armed forces during World War II (Smith 1993: 136). Some are convicts, for at least three temples are behind prison walls. With the help of Nation's lawyers these Muslim prisoners have played a role in constitutional changes over the years. However, Smith (1993: 133) is correct in pointing out that: 'By initiating litigation, Muslim prisoners consciously participated in governmental processes that their professed philosophical doctrines regarded as illegitimate.' The FOI ensures that all members hold down their allocated jobs, giving a full day's work for the wages received. Farrakhan explicitly states the aim: 'Why not let us handle the inmate and lessen the taxpayer's burden? ...We can reform our people and make them productive members of society' (quoted in Gardell 1996: 309). The rank-and-file are forced to sell the Nation's papers 'often having to buy the papers from their own wages if they failed to meet a certain sales quota' (White Jr., 2001).

It is essential to point out how conveniently this strategy of organizing prisoners chimes with US capitalism's latest turn towards mass incarceration. Wacquant (2002) has argued that four 'peculiar institutions' have successfully been employed to control and discipline Afro-Americans. The first is chattel slavery (1619–1865), which lasted up to the Civil War and was based on plantation economy and accumulated capital through 'unfree fixed labour'. The second 'peculiar institution' was the notorious Jim Crow (South, 1865–1965) ensemble of social and legal codes. Wacquant explains: 'Imported from the North where it had been experimented within cities, this regime stipulated that blacks travel in separate trains, streetcars and waiting rooms ... that they be incarcerated in separate cells and buried in separate cemeteries' (ibid., p 46). This phase was characterized by the 'free fixed labour' of sharecroppers in Agrarian business and workers in extractive industries.

After Jim Crow US capitalism employed the ghetto (North, 1915–1965) system with menial workers in the manufacturing industries whose 'free mobile labour' was instrumental in the 'success' of the Fordist economy. By a ghetto Wacquant does not mean merely a segregated district or an ethnic neighbourhood. Borrowing from the history of the reserved Jewish quarters in the cities of Renaissance Europe Wacquant defines a ghetto as 'essentially a sociospatial device that enables a dominant status group in an urban setting simultaneously to ostracize and exploit a subordinate group endowed with negative symbolic capital...' (ibid., p50). The ghetto is therefore an 'ethnoracial prison', characterized by stigma, coercion and isolation.

Wacquant designates the next institutional form of oppression as the 'hyperghetto & prison' (1968 to the present) and employs 'fixed surplus labour' as its main source of profit. Significantly this latter institution does not merely reflect racial divisions but indulges in active 'race-making' (Wacquant 2000: 54). The upshot of this mode of incarceration is to exclude convicts from citizenship with all its real and imaginary 'benefits', such as cultural capital, public aid, legal representation and political participation in decision-making. Into this cauldron of despair wades in the Nation of Islam with its army of professional recruiting agents as the last hope for many alienated individuals caught in the judicial labyrinth. Being a member of NOI may mean survival

in prison, early release and a job offer at the end of one's term of imprisonment. The appeal of this arrangement for convicts trapped in a vicious circle cannot be overstated.

After the 'lumpen-proletariat' the nation targeted businessmen, professionals, students and celebrities. The rap group Public Enemy, for instance, embarked on 'educating' black people through 'the words of Malcolm, Mao Tse-Tung, Ayatollah Khomeini, Nelson Mandela, and Minister Farrakhan'. In case the reader needs further evidence that Farrakhan is indeed a man possessed his views on Blues and Jazz should prove convincing: 'No more blues — black Man don't sing BLUES NO MORE!! ... black Man don't play jazz no more...not that stuff that comes out of our slave days'. Both Blues and Jazz are mostly secular as well as being associated on occasion with rival Muslim sects. The Ahmaddiya Movement,<sup>15</sup> for instance, had many jazz musicians (e.g. Art Blakey) who developed their own unique blend of bebop and Arabic. And many rhythm-and-blues, and pop musicians began their careers with the Ansarullah Nubian Islamic Hebrews. Nelson (1991) explains:

the early blues [represent] the true foundation of all secular black music in America ... [and] express conditions associated with what James Cone refers to as the 'burden of freedom'. Ex-slaves had to cope with the intersection of racism and its side effects of poor housing, inadequate education and limited job opportunities. Many of the early communities of former slaves revolved around the sharecropping system, an arrangement that kept black men and women in debt to their white employers virtually all year round. Such conditions were ripe for the 'ghettoization' of freed persons in the South and the creation of the blues (ibid.).

Moreover, blues singers have historically functioned as 'priest-philosophers' for the 'black community' and Farrakhan rightly sees them as political rivals. This explains his animosity towards them.

## **Gangs and landlords**

Realizing the youthful appeal of gang members and rap groups, the Nation under the guidance of Minister Khallid Muhammad, began a concerted effort to recruit them. As Gardell (1996: 295) has observed: 'What reggae was to the expansion of the Rastafarian movement in the 1970s, so hip-hop is to the spread of black Islam in the 1980s and 1990s.' Gangs such as the Crips and Bloods from Los Angeles, the Gangsta Disciples of Chicago, and the Zulu Nation of Miami and the Bronx were approached. Rap groups such as Public Enemy, Niggas With Attitude, Ice Cube and Tupac Shakur took time out of their hectic money generating schedules to play at being revolutionaries. In 'the society of the spectacle' a photo opportunity with 'hard core' rap artists can go a long way in establishing one's street credentials.

The US government's housing policy had made affordable housing inaccessible to millions of proletarians many of them blacks. Moreover, there was systematic discrimination against black proletarians in terms of denying them 'government mortgage money'. The situation created a new role for the NOI. As landlords, the Nation began social engineering the landscape as a symbolic act of urban renewal, '... Elijah Muhammad bought a large modern apartment building in Chicago, evicted the white tenants, moved in house-hungry Negroes from the South Side ghetto and lowered rents' (White Jr. 2001). Some of the Fruits were turned into a security firm that patrols crime-ridden estates; only they also try to preach to the residents and recruit the vulnerable and politically naïve. All this was carried out with the tacit consent of Chicago's political white elite with whom the Nation had established cordial relationships as far back as the 50s when

Elijah Muhammad courted the city's boss, Richard J. Daley. This also explains why although the Chicago police department routinely harassed and victimized black residents, the Nation 'rarely experienced the sort of police raids and harassment that occurred frequently in other cities' (Marable 1998: 172). A decade later, J Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO ('counter intelligence program') 'seemed to come to an accommodation with the Nation of Islam' whilst twenty-nine Black Panthers were assassinated and hundreds jailed (Robinson 1997:152).

Such social engineering acted as useful propaganda ploys whilst making the membership ever-more financially dependent on the goodwill of the leadership. Last but not least they were sound real-estate investments. Despite the Nation's rhetoric regarding self-sufficiency and economic independence from the establishment, 'Nation members were subsidized housing, welfare checks, and food stamps and participated in Women Infant Children programs' (White Jr., *ibid.* p 92). Of course there is nothing wrong with one part of the proletariat receiving aid from the dead and living labour of another section of the proletariat but the trend towards welfare dependency shows the chasm between the group's propaganda and the dire living conditions of the rank-and-file. The leadership, however, never seem short of a dime or two. Farrakhan and his cronies always stay at the best hotels, travel, eat and dress in style. Like good businessmen they are forever on the lookout for opportunities to make a fast buck. The rank-and-file are indirectly used in these risky ventures as collateral. According to insiders, credit card scams, illegal NOI drug busts and fraud are widespread within the organization. One infamous example came to light when Minister Khallid Muhammad, a leading member of the Nation, was caught falsifying documents in order to obtain a bank loan to purchase property in Atlanta.

Contrary to current wisdom, the NOI shift of policy away from political engagement and abstentionism began well before Farrakhan's rise to power. But it is true that Uncle Louis has given this strategy a more coherent direction, especially since the subtle shift in the class composition of the NOI virtually guarantees proletarian compliance with every decision of the leadership. For instance he endorsed Harold Washington, Chicago's black mayoral candidate. Washington narrowly won the 1983 election and 'rewarded Farrakhan with praise and admiration' (White Jr., *ibid.* p 100). Farrakhan's big break came when the far more prominent Reverend Jesse Jackson invited him 'to be a member of a coalition of black leaders travelling to Damascus, Syria, to negotiate the release of black Air Force pilot Robert Goodman, who had been shot down after illegally entering Syria's airspace' (*ibid.* p 102).

## **8) The Million Men Parade**

### **Reactionary mobilization**

We will pass swiftly over Farrakhan's claims that his inspiration for the Million-Man March is based on his 'vision of being swept into a UFO that took him to a larger mothership. While in the UFO, he claims to have spoken to the late Elijah Muhammad before being beamed back to earth' (Washington Post, Sept 18, 1995). As Palmer explains this UFO fantasy is an inseparable doctrinal link to the ideas of Elijah Muhammad himself who believed that blacks were originally 'moon people' and that the UFO 'mother wheel' was piloted by 13 youths who perpetually orbited the earth, waiting to unleash global destruction on whites, while rescuing all blacks (Palmer, *ibid.*).

The Nation of Islam was not deemed important enough to be invited to the original 1963 march on Washington. Some of Malcolm X's fiery language may also have been responsible. A

disgruntled Malcolm X hit back by branding the march as a farce as it was 'run, financed, and controlled by whites, Jews, labor unions, corporate America and the Kennedy administration' (White Jr. 2001: 101). Asked his views on the campaign and its leadership, he replied: 'Martin Luther King is a chump, not a champ' (Segal 2001: 239).

The 1995 Million-Man March could only be given the go-head (from both the NOI and the US media) when it was safe to assume that the proletariat had been marginalized. White Jr. (2001: 152) suggests it was also Farrakhan's way of undermining a rival's (Minister Silis Muhammad) bid for a march to demand repayment for black slavery. Four years later a 'battle over a newspaper route between followers of Lost-Found leader Silis Muhammad and members of the rival and more powerful Nation Of Islam led by Minister Louis Farrakhan had erupted in all-out war' (Noel 1999).

As it turned out only the better off could pay the travel fair to Washington. There was an \$11 registration fee, a \$3.99 per minute 900 number for call-in registration, a \$700 vendor's fee and constant appeals for donations from the faithful (Palmer, *ibid.*). Exactly how much of this went towards paying the policing bill is anyone's guess. At a personal level, the March intended to outshine the memory of Dr Luther King's 1963 March on Washington. This, by contrast, was meant to be a 'serious' march. The 1963 march was condemned for being filled with 'entertainment, frolicking, and groping' of female marchers. It was, therefore, perfectly natural for black women not to be invited to the march. The Nation's appeal, after all, stems partly from its male-centeredness, itself a reaction against 'female-dominated black Baptist churches' (Kulungowski 1996). Farrakhan, after all, believes, 'when you see a real man you are looking at God', and continues in his usual patronizing tone, 'there's no woman on earth who would not be happy with a man who is a reflection of God' (quoted in Gardell: 1996: 330). Moreover, the event was designed as redemption from both contemporary and original sin and Farrakhan is on record as claiming that the black man fell from grace and was destroyed 'through our women'. The March aimed at recreating the power relationship that existed between black men and women when the latter was content with acting the role of the good housewife:

God gave woman to man, according to the Bible, as help mate, to meet your wants, your aspirations ... [But] pleasure comes after work! (quoted in Gardell 1996: 331)

The Nation advocates the death penalty for adultery, incest, rape and interracial sex but realizes it needs real power before it can implement its program (Gardell 1996: 337). Despite all this 'several women's organizations endorsed the event, including the National Council of Negro Women and the National black Women's Political Congress' (Marable 1996: 139). This is perhaps a reflection of the times. In years gone by when the 'secular' Stokely Carmichael said 'the only position for women in the movement is prone', both black and white women united to oppose his arrogant, sexist jibe. When Farrakhan instructed the women to stay at home and mind the kitchen he was displaying an unusual amount of tolerance towards a despised gender, for in years gone by he was less reserved:

The black woman should not belong to any women's liberation movement. That's for the white woman ... A woman is the prize possession of a man ... A man should protect his women even if he has to spank her ... A man shouldn't generally beat a woman ... but some of our women who want to go out and disgrace the Nation need a whippin (Farrakhan, Message at the East, Jan 1971).

The same survey discovered that ‘fully 94 percent of all people responding to the survey supported the aims of the march... [and] some 84 percent of all respondents believed that the march would have an overall favourable effect on race relations in the [USA]’ (ibid., p 62)! Thankfully the article also captures a few moments of insights besides its reified quantitative survey. For instance, a black woman is quoted as offering the following pearl of wisdom: ‘Farrakhan is a jerk but a lot more happened there in D.C. than him.’ A non-black woman from New Jersey saw things with equal clarity: ‘I had to pinch myself constantly. Didn’t know whether I was watching a white religious right’s rally or an all male religious or an all-male religious Islamic gathering in Iran.’ A final quote from a black man from New Jersey is worth mentioning: ‘If he were not white, Newt Gingrich would have joined the march and celebrated it as a victory for the conservative cause’ (ibid, p. 63). It is noteworthy that many people who were happy going on the march as an act of solidarity with fellow blacks, were not interested in the content of Farrakhan’s speech. Segal (2001: 236) writes:

He lost so many of his listeners in a labyrinth of historical references and numerical predictions that barely a third remained till the end to join in the pledge of black men to abstain from violence, drugs, sexual and verbal abuse, in helping to restore their community.

The numerological references seem to have been intended to fraternal lodge organizations present on the march:

There, in the middle of this mall is the Washington Monument, 555 feet high. But if we put a 1 in front of that 555 feet, we get 1555, the year that our first fathers landed on the shores of Jamestown, Virginia as slaves ... (quoted in Robinson: 2001: 125).

The March also cemented the wealth of the Nation’s inner circle through capitalist protectionism. All rival yuppies, who had intended to use the March as a business opportunity, were branded as enemies of Elijah Muhammad and the plum pickings were reserved for NOI’s top brass. From the podium Farrakhan encouraged black men to ‘atone for their sins’ and take ‘personal responsibility for conditions in the ghettos. He also took the opportunity to once again blame Jews, Koreans and Vietnamese for exploiting the black ‘community’. The march was endorsed by the big public service unions despite the fact that non-black male workers and black female workers were purposefully excluded from the spectacle (Black History and the Class Struggle: 1996). In so doing, trade union bureaucracies once again displayed their anti-proletarian credentials for all to see. According to Marable (ibid., p 141):

Neither Farrakhan nor Chavis [the co-organizer of the event] has significant influence within black labor unions or the Coalition of black Trade Unionists. Their core program was designed to appeal in the broadest possible terms to racial solidarity, while saying next to nothing about the growing class stratification within the black communities.

The economic analysis was, as indicated above, ‘taken almost verbatim from Booker T. Washington’s program of black petty entrepreneurship and political cooperation with white conservatives’ (Marable 1998: 164). Likewise in this case, some ‘white’ sections of the ruling class supported the march as it both chimed with Newt Gingrich’s reactionary ‘Contract with America’

and doubled up as a giant voter enrolment device in a country where voter apathy is considered a genuine problem for capitalism. Marable (1998: 163) claims 'approximately 1.5 million more African American men participated in the 1996 presidential election than in the election of four years earlier.' According to Young (2002a: 6), 'today only 9% of African-Americans vote Republican'. However, there are various moves being conducted to steer a 'fundamental realignment' in American politics. Wallace D. Muhammad had already indicated such a move when he refused to support Jesse Jackson's 1984 candidacy, adding that in his view, 'on the whole, the Reagan administration had been good for the country' (Gardell 1996: 113). The 'maverick' and unpredictable, although highly respected ex-advisor to Ronald Reagan, Jude Wanniski, believes that, 'Muslims need someone to unify the Islamic world — that's Farrakhan' (Young, *ibid*). Consequently, he has been vigorously courting the Nation of Islam. Young (2002a: 6) continues, '[Wanniski's] support for Farrakhan stems from a desire to see a fundamental realignment in American politics to win African-Americans over to the Republican Party. Farrakhan, he believes, is the key'.

### **Aftermath of the March**

The aftermath of the Million-Man March was very disappointing for Farrakhan, although ironically many black organizations, even some that had opposed the march such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, gained fresh recruits. He had intended to use it as a springboard for loftier aims but his appeal failed to find a resonance within the black proletariat. This was partly because most had come to show solidarity with each other and not to be sermonized by the Nation. Cut backs in the welfare system, high levels of unemployment and the mass incarcerations of several million African American young men were the real grievances that the March refused to address.

Contrast the political achievements of this march with the march on Washington organized by A. Philip Randolph, the President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, in 1941. Then the demand was,

the end of segregation in defense jobs, in government departments and the armed forces ... The vision of 100,000 angry blacks in Washington was enough to get President Roosevelt to issue an executive order establishing a committee on fair employment practice (John Alan 2001).

One million men seeking 'atonement' for alleged 'sins', however, merely underlined the reactionary nature of Farrakhan's mobilization. Moreover, the level of financial corruption was such as to alienate the participants and the lawsuits filed against the Nation by disgruntled African American businesses for non-payment of bills created additional problems. Some businessmen were intimidated by the Fruits when they dared to ask for their money back but even Farrakhan understood this could only stall them temporarily.

When a national black political rally was organized to follow up the Million-Man March only two thousand faithfuls turned up and the World Day Atonement celebration of the anniversary of the March attracted 150,000 New Yorkers. Chavis by now had become so dependent on Farrakhan that his National African American Leadership Summit organized at St. Louis in 1996 was no more than a front for the Nation of Islam. Black Nationalism reached new depths of depravity during the summit when Lyndon La Rouche, a leading American fascist and defender of

Apartheid in South Africa, was proudly introduced to the delegates as a major speaker. Marable describes how,

instantly the crowd turned against Bevel [Reverend James Bevel, a recent convert to political conservatism] and La Rouche, booing them off the stage and intimidating them into silence. A fistfight erupted between several black nationalists and some supporters of La Rouche, which was broken up by Farrakhan's security force, members of the Fruit of Islam. Throughout the country, perplexed African American activists asked themselves why a notorious white supremacist and fascist would be permitted to address a black political convention (Marable 1998: 165).

In order to suppress criticism of its 'leadership' of the march and influence future trends, the Nation set up the self-appointed 'Council on black Affairs'. Part of this Council's task was to reshape the collective memory of the march by denouncing emerging rivals to Farrakhan. According to Young (2002b: 2) the Council produced a book entitled the American Directory of Certified Uncle Toms. 'It ranks over 50 black leaders', writes Young, 'past and present, according to a five-star Uncle Tom rating, with five being the worst. Michael Jackson, who has had plastic surgery which left many of his black features destroyed, gets one star; Bayard Rustin, the gay activist who organized the march on Washington at which King made his 'I have a dream' speech, gets five; WEB Dubois, a pioneer of Pan-Africanism ... is also, according to the authors, a five-star Uncle Tom' (ibid.).

As Young (2002b) makes clear in his article, this 'is in fact a reactionary form of psychological and behavioural racial policing within black communities.' Moreover, as explained in footnote 1 at the beginning of the text, it represents a distortion of the literary character, Uncle Tom. Although far from a revolutionary, Tom refuses to punish a fellow slave despite strict orders from his master or to rat on escaped slaves. He is whipped himself for this act of insubordination with fatal consequences. Harriet Beecher Stowe was a mere liberal with ideas that sound decidedly patronising to us but 'what is now commonly regarded as a sentimentalist, racist text was at the time received as a vicious polemic against slavery in general and against the fugitive slave law in particular' (Young, *ibid.*, p 1).

It is worth noting that two years later, in October 1997, Afro-American women jammed the streets of Philadelphia in what became known as the Million Women March. Organized with a great deal less fuss and corruption, the rally was intended to highlight issues that (white dominated) women's organizations tend to ignore, such as the abuse of black human rights, the problem of drugs and rampant crime. Although religion was heavily represented on this march by the Christian church, the Black Muslims' presence was marginal.

However, despite the above-mentioned setbacks and the Nation's failure to cash-in on the Million Man March (1995), it still displays an impressive ability for the reactionary mobilization of the masses. Yet it is also significant that as soon as Farrakhan raises explicitly 'political' issues or indulges in 'anti-American' rhetoric, he loses large chunks of his audience. In 1996 a more permanent solution for the Nation's financial burdens was sought in Farrakhan's World Friendship Tour of a number of 'rogue' states, such as Iran, Libya, Iraq, Sudan, Nigeria and Cuba.

In Iran he rubbed shoulders with ex-President Rafsanjani, personally responsible for the execution of scores of proletarian revolutionaries. There followed a succession of 'tea-ceremonies' with other fascist ayatollahs. In a large rally in Tehran Farrakhan's hyperbole was half-heartedly

applauded by a crowd more politically savvy than our intrepid warrior: ‘God will destroy America by the hands of Muslims ... God will not give Japan or Europe the honour of bringing down the United States; this is an honour God will bestow upon Muslims’ (ADL website).<sup>16</sup> Promising to use American Muslims as a pressure group inside the USA for the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran, he warmed to his theme: ‘We live in the centre of corruption and struggle in the heart of the Great Satan’. A few days later during his trip to Iraq, Farrakhan promised his full support for removing the economic sanction imposed by the USA.

In Libya, Qadhafi offered the Nation a staggering \$1 billion booty in order to fight America ‘from the inside’. At this point the US government became serious. If the dubious and at times massaged pronouncements of the Anti-Defamation League is to be believed,

the U.S. Department of Justice sent a letter to the Nation of Islam leader advising him that the Foreign Agent registration Act requires all citizens working on behalf of a foreign entity to influence US policy to formally register with the Department as foreign agents.

Farrakhan is fully aware of how best to use Qadhafi, even if some of his less politically savvy ‘soldiers’ occasionally lose the plot. For instance, in the 1983 ‘First International Symposium on the Thought of Muammar Al Qathafi’, held in Libya, a representative of the NOI, Maleek Rashadeen, proposed armed struggle as a mechanism for bringing down the US government:

Imagine 70% of America’s army made up by well-trained, dissatisfied, angry black men and women ... America is definitely going to fight a major world war outside, with a rebelling black and white army and revolution inside her borders (Gardell 1996: 208).

Qadhafi, warming to this thesis, promised:

We support you to create [an] independent state, to create [an] independent black army. We are ready to train you and to give you arms, because your cause is [a] just cause (quoted in Gardell 1996: 209).

It is the way with rhetorical discourse that at some critical point it could become re-animated, turn around and unexpectedly bite the speaker in the nether regions. Such was the effect of Rashadeen’s Boy Scout machismo. Farrakhan interceded at this stage and patronisingly criticised both Rashadeen and Qadhafi for being unrealistic.

We don’t need anybody outside of us to tell us how to win the fight ... Qadhafi can’t guide us ... My brother [Qadhafi] is a revolutionary and I told him that I am one too, but my revolution has to be brought about by this book, the Quran, and not by buying weapons. Because I can’t out-weapon the weaponman, see, and if I start arming the Brothers the government will come down on us instantaneously (quoted in Gardell 1996: 209).

So, Qadhafi can only expect the occasional sympathetic article in the Final Call for his financial generosity, Rashadeen can return to obscurity and feeble media-inspired martial parades with his fruity friends (the FOI), and Farrakhan to the safety of ‘loyal opposition’ and ever-closer ties with the US ruling elite. All’s well that ends well!

In Nigeria, he made light of the military junta's execution of the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela came under intense pressure not to hold a meeting with Farrakhan but decided to go ahead with a face-to-face. A few days later Farrakhan claimed: 'Light skin is weak, dark skin is strong'. He also took the opportunity to renew his demand for land in Africa:

We have asked that territory be set aside in Africa because we did not leave voluntarily. We have a right to Africa. This is our motherland. You have a vast land here that is not used. Over a million blacks are in prison right now, with no future. We are saying give them to us to teach them, reform them, and let them work off their time.

The project, suspiciously similar to a mixture of a black Australia and Liberia was given a frosty reception.

In Sudan, Farrakhan ignored the thorny issue of the slavery of proletarian Sudanese (mostly Christian) by bourgeois Sudanese (mostly Muslim) for as long as he could. On one occasion when he lost his temper he angrily responded to reporters: 'There is no slavery in Sudan. But prove me a liar and go there and see for yourself and come back and tell the world what you have found'. Journalists for the Baltimore Sun did just that. Having exposed several camps they even purchased a slave boy as proof. Abdul Akbar Muhammad, the Nation's International Representative, conveniently branded the whole expose as a Jewish conspiracy (ADL 2001). Perhaps what is most surprising is that Middle Eastern politicians usually well informed about American politics, fell for his routine and treated him like a head of state.

Two years later Farrakhan embarked on yet another whistle stop tour of the globe, including Israel. He was allowed in as a private U.S. citizen although there were some demonstrations against his visit. Later Farrakhan claimed that Islamic militants were not to blame for the massacres carried out in Algeria. During his brief visit to Russia, Farrakhan claims that '... they [Russian authorities] tried to guide our plane into the mountains, it's true, they tried to kill us!' (Ibid.).

## 9) Conclusions

### Black proletariat

The 'black' proletariat in the U.S.A. has had a tremendous impact on the evolution of class struggle. C.L.R James has argued that if it were not for the masses of Negroes of the South, through the underground railroad and numerous other revolts before the Civil War, the northern bourgeoisie and the Southern 'plantocracy' would have come to a compromise. 'What broke that compromise?' asks James,

It was the Fugitive Slave Act. They could prevent everything else for the time being, but they could not prevent the slaves from coming, and the revolutionaries in the North from assisting them. So that we find that here in the history of the United States of America such is the situation of the masses of the Negro people and their readiness to revolt at the slightest opportunity, that as far back as the Civil war, in relation to the American bourgeoisie, they formed a force which initiated and stimulated and acted as a ferment (CLR James 1948).

He goes on to state that:

As the struggle develops, such is the situation of the Negroes in the United States, that the emancipation of the slaves becomes an absolute necessity, politically, organisationally and from a military point of view ... The Negroes are incorporated into the battle against the South. Not only are they incorporated here, but later they are incorporated also into the military government which smashes down the remnants of resistance in the Southern states ... But, when this is done, the Negroes are deserted by the bourgeoisie, and there falls upon them a very terrible repression (ibid.).

It is noticeable that reactionary movements organized by bourgeois blacks only gain support to the extent that the black proletariat has been defeated. This is as true of Farrakhan's neo-liberal agenda as it is of the social democratic program of Jesse Jackson. Again James makes this abundantly clear:

Some of us think it is fairly clear that the Garvey movement came and looked to Africa because there was no proletarian movement in the United States to give it a lead, to do for this great eruption of the Negroes what the Civil War and the Populist movement had done for the insurgent Negroes of those days (ibid.).

By the 1940s many black proletarians were engaged in seminal labour disputes in the auto, steel and coal industries. Initially people like Henry Ford saw this as an opportunity to integrate a 'compliant' section of the proletariat into the production process whilst dividing the workers along racial lines. 'First of all', writes James,

[Ford] wanted them for hard, rough work. I am also informed by the comrades from Detroit he was very anxious to play a paternalistic role with the Negro petty bourgeoisie. He wanted to show them he was not the person that these people said he was- look! He was giving Negroes opportunities in his plant.

The militancy shown by black proletarians in Detroit as well as elsewhere sabotaged this project of co-option. Significantly, from our point of view, it also meant that reactionary black bourgeois leaders had a hard task recruiting from these highly politicised sections of the proletariat. Raya Dunayevskaya (1973) quotes a black worker from Oakland, California, disgusted by the reactionary slogan of 'Black power':

Black Power has become a gigantic reindeer — hat rack with many opposing hats hanging there, including the hat of black Capitalism. The possible unity of black and white workers to destroy the system of capitalism is a punch at the gut nerve of all middle class intellectuals and elitist groups, black or white.

Detroit at this period witnessed a number of significant wildcat strikes where 'black workers joined with white coworkers ... for better wages and improved working conditions' (Bush 1999: 206). However, the union bureaucracy, which could do nothing about these acts of solidarity, once again showed its counter-revolutionary nature as soon as the wave of strikes was over. Bush (1999: 206) describes how,

in the aftermath of the strike, however, punitive measures were launched at some of the Black workers...Despite the role these workers played in uniting these workers played in uniting these traditional antagonists, the UAW [United Auto Workers] did not defend the workers who were fired.

This act of 'betrayal' (since unions are counter-revolutionary it is mistaken to describe their activities as betrayals), led to the formation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) at Dodge Main. 'In May 1968', writes Bush (1999: 207), 'DRUM led a wildcat strike in which Chrysler's production dropped by 1,900 cars. This strike gained considerable publicity for DRUM and led to the proliferation of Revolutionary Union Movements throughout the Detroit area, at Ford and General Motors plants, and at the United Parcel Service.' It is clear that as soon as proletarians from different ethnic or racial backgrounds unite to oppose capital, reactionary ideologies such as nationalism and separatism go into hibernation, to be revived whenever the threat of revolution has passed.

In 1741, word-of-mouth spread a 'report' that blacks and poor whites were uniting to overtake [New York City] ... Fear of the alliance was so great that the city offered rewards for names. Subsequently 200 blacks and whites were arrested. Eighteen blacks were hanged; thirteen were burned alive. Four whites, two of them women, were hanged (Dennis & Willmarh 1984).

If a 'report' was sufficient to create such panic amongst the ruling class, one can imagine the psychological scars left by real events. The Watts riots of 1965, the Detroit riots of 1967 and the Los Angeles riots of 1992 provide proletarians with zones of autonomous development which when generalized to the workplace challenge the very fabric of capitalism. During the Detroit riots, for instance, proletarians made a direct attack on police stations and engaged in collective acts of 'shopping': 'It was just like Negroes and whites were shopping together, only they weren't paying for anything' (Dunayevskaya, *ibid.*). It is this togetherness, this cross-racial proletarian solidarity that terrifies racist filth like Farrakhan and his bourgeois crew. Once during an interview with Bermuda TV, he was asked: 'Is it possible for you to look at people as people per se, without regard to any color, black, Yellow, white?' His response was categorical: 'No, I think this is some of the folly that white people have taught black people.'

Bill Fletcher, Jr. (1999: 5) has pointed out how black working class organizations have had a tough time establishing themselves on US soil. For instance, the National Negro Labor Council (NNLC, 1951-55) tried to organize against CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) backtracking on race and racism:

The NNLC demanded jobs for Black workers (from the corporations); opposition to Jim Crow segregation, and equity within the trade union movement. A victim of anti-communist repression, the NNLC was forced to dissolve at precisely the moment that the Civil Rights Movement was merging.

Even a reformist organization, therefore, has the full weight of the state and the white trade union bureaucracy arrayed against them. Significantly, he adds,

That the objectives of large sections of the Black petty bourgeoisie had been met resulted in their taking a different course of action — sometimes at the expense of the Black working class and sometimes displaying pure benign neglect. The collapse of the civil rights consensus coincided with the offensive of US capital against the working class. Living standards for the average worker declined significantly from

around 1973 onwards. For Black workers, this decline has been matched by a growing gap between themselves and white workers, in which one factor was the disproportionate impact of so-called de-industrialisation on Black workers (Fletcher 1999: 8).

A depressing historical pattern has developed over the years, which explains the appeal of Black Muslims to many young working class blacks. Racist pogroms against blacks are used as pretext by the state to attack secular and radical forces, creating 'a vacuum of leadership'. The Black Muslims then fill the void and recruit aggressively. Farrakhan talking about the need to change tactics and strategy whenever necessary is revealing:

... It's not for me to tell you at every turn what stratagem or tactic I am applying to get us safely to the goal and objective. It's not for me as a general to tell you that. The generals are not to tell tactics, the generals give orders. And that's my job to give orders and your job is to obey the orders (quoted in Gardell 1996: 262).

Once the recruitment drive is slowing down, the Nation withdraws inward in preparation for the next opportunity. The risks to the organization are minimal whilst the rewards are massive. For instance, during W/W II, when many blacks were fighting and dying for US capitalism, there was a wave racist attack. In one year (1943), there were 242 reported racial battles in 47 cities, including Newark, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Chicago, Cambridge and Brooklyn. 'Zoot suit riots occurred in many cities', writes Bush (1999: 153), 'where a thousand white sailors and soldiers roamed the streets stripping zoot suits [a distinctive outfit worn by young working class blacks belonging to a sub-culture at odds with the church influenced orthodoxy] from Black and Chicano men ... FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover announced plans to arrest communist agitators.' Whether inadvertently or by design, the path was cleared for the nation's recruiting drive to commence.

### **Ideological contradictions**

The platonic idealism, racial superiority and parochial aspects of the NOI's ideology will always make it a minority within the Islamic Movement. Ironically, it is precisely these elements that make it popular amongst certain sections of the black population in the U.S. Farrakhan knows that any move towards Islamic orthodoxy is counterproductive, and yet because of his increasing financial dependency on Sunni Muslims from the Arab world, he has little choice but to make concessions to orthodoxy. For instance, throughout the 1980s Farrakhan had preached that the,

Arab way of Islam is not the NOI way. The messenger taught us... that we don't have to pray or worship like you. You, Arab, prostrate yourself because you have an evil nature. The black man is good by nature, he is a God (Quoted in White, Jr., *ibid.*, p 185).

Yet when it suited his financial designs, and against considerable opposition from the rank-and-file, he demoted the Nation's two greatest past leaders, Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad, 'from being divinities of the Quran to being merely great Muslim leaders' (*ibid.*). In a recent annual Savior's Day convention in Chicago, Farrakhan declared, 'We bear witness that there is no prophet after the prophet Mohammad' (New York Times 2000). Since Wallace Muhammad's organization has been gaining members at an impressive rate lately (ironically despite its orthodox interpretations), Farrakhan also decided to let bygones be bygones. A meeting between Wallace Muhammad and Farrakhan was arranged with a view to bringing the NOI under the umbrella of

mainstream Orthodox Islam. This is another example of the pendulum swinging between Black Nationalism and orthodox Islam depending on the direction of the wind. In a similar move the Nation has given Muslim/Christian unity top priority in its agenda (Gardell 1996: 242). Although it is noteworthy that mostly black Christianity is being wooed, with Farrakhan still actively hostile to 'white-oriented' Christianity. In 1985 he said, 'Very humbly, in the sight of God, I [Farrakhan] am much more important than the pope ... You can't compare the leader of a false religion with God's servant who comes to condemn it' (quoted in Gardell 1996: 243). As working class atheists who reject the very concept of god and authority, we see no choice but to 'humbly' decline to take side in this fascinating duel.

Precisely because the Nation combines various elements from Black Nationalist ideology, Islamic religion, cult-worshipping rituals and gang activities it always has to be nimble-footed in its dealings with the outside world. The road to Armageddon has to be speeded up and slowed down according to circumstances. In this respect, Booker T. Washington's inspired marketing techniques of offering a multiple choice of interpretations to readers/listeners has served the Nation well. However, it is a difficult balancing act fraught with danger.

Sometimes even tried and tested formulas let the Nation down. One of their most successful tactics over the years has been to recruit famous celebrities, usually sportsmen and milk the publicity for all its worth. Such was the case with Cassius Clay, later known as Muhammad Ali, who joined the Nation in 1964. In the 90s, the Nation spent a great deal of effort in trying to recruit another heavyweight champion, Mike Tyson, to the extent that Farrakhan sent his own son, Mustapha, with instructions to befriend the unpredictable champ. Later when Tyson was accused of raping Desiree Washington, Farrakhan embarked on a vicious and sexist character assassination campaign in order to ingratiate himself with Tyson. Before a Cleveland audience, he said:

What type of a woman was [Desiree Washington]? What type of a woman would go to a man's room at 2:00 in the morning? She knew that they were not going to look at television. She knew what a hotel room looked like. And, now, she has the arrogance to cry rape (Quoted in White Jr., *ibid.*, p 218).

This language sounds shocking only if we forget that the Nation's propaganda deliberately targets those male members of the 'black' proletariat who feel inferior, both in relation to 'white' America and also in relation to educated 'black' women. Despite conducting a wonderful PR exercise on behalf of the soon to be convicted Tyson, the latter spurned the overtures of the Nation to convert instead to Sunni Islam. Not despondent, the Nation then targeted Riddick Bowe, who succeeded Tyson as heavyweight champion. However, nothing came of this adventure either since Bowe decided to retire from boxing and join the United States Marines!

The trend towards Rainbow Coalitions with the NOI as the prime mover will, therefore, continue, as will the trading partnerships the Nation has built up over decades with Japan, Turkey, Argentina, Panama, Jamaica, Cuba, Costa Rica, Saudi Arabia and Ghana. This emphasis on material gain is perfectly in keeping with NOI's rejection of the concepts of heaven and hell. In the future, we may witness wackier pyramid structure enterprises as a desperate measure to balance the Nation's books. It is noteworthy that part of the reason for the NOI's more 'conciliatory' approach in recent months has been the criticism of prominent blacks. The Mendelssohn violin concertos, billed as a symbolic peace offerings to the 'Jewish community' were rebuffed. Harass-

ment and threats of rival black leaders no longer work. When the Nation threatened Elijah's own grandson in the 60s, 'Hasan Harrieff, sought protection by he FBI' (Segal 2001: 231).

However, more recently during a 1999 rally at Madison Square Garden, when the likes of David Denkins (a black City Clerk) were threatened with assassination from the podium and another councilman, Bill Perkins, was manhandled by the Fruits, several elected black officials stepped forward to denounce the intimidation, the message and the march (Herbert 1999). This is in contrast to the 1970s when soldiers of the FOI could murder seven Hanafis (a rival muslim sect) and get away with it.<sup>17</sup> Another problem for the Nation will be the concerted effort made by Christian evangelicals to win back recruits from them. Christians have decided that the church has neglected the 'issue of racism' for too long and is now instructing members to 'witness to the Nation of Islam':

Don't overwhelm them [i.e. members of the NOI] with Scripture. They will not listen if they are overwhelmed. Don't use a King James Bible because, according to some Muslims, King James himself translated this version and corrupted it... Avoid all pictures of God, Jesus, or other biblical personalities as white with blue eyes and blond hair (Buckner 1998).

This is true of white christians as well as the black church who having almost given up on black urban males are once again recruiting aggressively amongst this group.

The general intensification of the social struggle must lead towards a sharpening of class antagonisms between the NOI and those who find their historical roots in the tri-racial (white, black, native Indian) isolate communities of the past and the urban rioters of Los Angeles and elsewhere. Perhaps to go forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the 'black' proletariat needs to reclaim part of its tradition. How can the Nation of Islam prosper in a climate where the achievements of Nat Turner, Fredrick Douglass, Lucy Parsons, Timothy Thomas Fortune, Angelo Herndon, Paul Robeson and most significant of all, James Carr have become part of our collective memory? Who will pay attention to the rants of a bourgeois demagogue like Farrakhan then? The resurgence of the autonomous proletariat throughout the world as witnessed in some sections of the anti-capitalist movement parallels a newly found consciousness that dispenses with reactionaries such as Mao, Malcolm X, Lenin and Che Guevara. When today's wage-slave rebellions begin to be inspired by the 250-recorded cases of slave revolts throughout American history, wildcat strikes and proletarian riots, who will heed the Nation's strategy of class collaboration? Once the universal proletarian program of the abolition of wage-slavery, the money system, the state, racism, religion, sexism, homophobia and hierarchy are posited forcefully, reactionaries like the Nation of Islam (and their 'white', 'yellow' and 'brown' counterparts) will be consigned to the place they belong: the dustbin of history.

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(A note on sources: usually when the Melancholic Troglodytes embark on researching a topic, we rely on the contribution of previous revolutionaries to help us negotiate the often-tricky ravines of class struggle. In the case of the present text it proved impossible to find many useful texts. Many of our sources are from the liberal/social-democratic academia and some from dubious organizations such as the Nation itself, various Trotskyites, Stalinists and the Anti-Defamation League. The latter especially has an annoying habit of employing out of context quotes. The dearth of radical work on this topic and the general neglect of religious issues by (western) revolutionaries are regrettable. We hope this text has gone some way in addressing these shortcomings. Hopefully it will act as a platform for more erudite proletarian critiques.)

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