

Harlem's Socrates: Race First in Jim Crow America

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The radical socialist, agnostic, scholar, educator, and West-Indian American Hubert H. Harrison (1883-1927) fought tirelessly throughout his adult life for African-American progress and civil rights, although his role in African-American radical thought has only just begun to be understood. Harrison represents a sparsely documented current in early twentieth-century African-American radicalism, based in New Negro philosophy and socialism. The father of "The New Negro Manhood Movement," Harrison's emphasis on socialism diminished as he increasingly emphasized and demanded a new Race First program for African Americans. In the view of Harrison's most distinguished biographer, Jeffrey Perry, by maintaining socialist beliefs Harrison combined radical class consciousness with radical race consciousness more than any other leader of his day.¹ As a leader and public ideologue, Harrison espoused beliefs similar to those held by African-American leaders such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey, yet Harrison also developed unique notions of progress and solutions for the "race problem." His greatest contributions to African-American history stem from his ideas and their successful diffusion via numerous large rallies, indoor lectures, and written works. Harrison put his ideas into action by founding several civil rights organizations,

each with varying degrees of success. Of his organizations, the Liberty League of 1917 held the most potential. As a historical character, however, Harrison has received little attention because of minimal success as a leader. Financial difficulties plagued his personal and public life, and the political climate of the time did not lend itself to the recognition of an anti-capitalist, anti-white supremacist, African-American radical.

Few major studies have been done on Harrison. Historian Wilfred S. Samuels in his 1980 doctoral dissertation, "Five Afro-Caribbean Voices in American Culture, 1917-1929," devoted some thirty pages to Harrison. John G. Jackson, historian and contemporary of Harrison, wrote an article dealing with Harrison's impressive contributions to the Harlem Renaissance. Jeffrey B. Perry wrote the first major biographical work about Harrison, not published until 2009, but a major boon for the recognition of Harrison's legacy. Perry shows how Harrison led the political sphere during the initial stages of the Harlem Renaissance and, as a result, does less to suggest why Harrison has not been widely recognized by historians of the period, although he certainly suggests numerous reasonable explanations.

As a major inspiration for African American radicals in Harlem, Harrison, the "Father of Harlem Radicalism," had a radical and comprehensive progressive platform that he hoped would improve the status and way of life for African Americans while aggressively and consciously targeting injustices in the educational, social, economic and political spheres. The nature in which he argued against injustice and for progress evolved over time, but at its core his ideas emanated from a tradition of "New Negro" progressive discourse. Building from that tradition, Harrison believed in leaving no room for accommodation to white-supremacy in light of segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynching and mob violence against African Americans, all within a nation based on democratic ideals. This belief led Harrison to criticize what he saw as the weak accommodationist

leadership of Booker T. Washington. Even radical leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois did not escape Harrison's scrutiny. Marcus Garvey, leader of the international organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), held beliefs most similar to Harrison and was also Harrison's biggest rival. Harrison found fault with the extremely popular Garvey for his refusal to promote a political plan for the UNIA and for his Pan-African program that envisioned a revitalized African homeland in Africa, putting less emphasis on African-American development within the United States. Harrison saw no potential in programs looking to establish a new homeland in Africa, instead advocating solutions based upon improving the situation in the United States. Many similarities exist between these different African American leaders, suggesting a need for Harrison to criticize and differentiate himself in order to draw more followers.

Harrison established his own trend of socialist New Negro ideology, influencing many contemporaries and admirers to seek independence from traditional political parties, from ideologies and from Old Guard African American leadership. He ardently promoted education for the masses through schooling when possible, and always through self-education, in order to improve African American standard of living. An acknowledgement of how leaders and organizations compared to Harrison on the pressing issues, as well as an explanation of New Negro progressive discourse and action, is useful in placing Harrison within the context of African American radical history and for understanding how other leaders achieved different forms of success that eventually overshadowed Harrison.

Putting Race First and New Negro ideals into action, Harrison, along with a community of interested intellectuals, created the Liberty League of Negro Americans on June 12, 1917, as the organization at the fore of the "New Negro Movement."² The Liberty League demanded vast social and political change in addressing the issues that plagued blacks. Particularly,

the organization demanded federal legislation against lynching and an end to both Jim Crow laws and segregation. These issues for Harrison, his colleagues, and his followers represented gross injustices in a democratic nation. In this sense, although socialist, Harrison and the Liberty League embraced democracy as the ideal, not realized for African Americans, by aspiring to work within the democratic system.

Harrison possessed many traits conducive to good leadership, such as a clear vision, an incredible intellect, amazing oratory skill, and an impressive commitment to his cause, but other aspects of his character hindered his success. Primarily, Harrison was poor with handling money. As a result, he and his projects suffered from financial hardships throughout his life. Often Harrison's message contained a more intellectual as opposed to an emotional appeal, something that contrasted him greatly from Garvey as Garveyism gained momentum, and limited the people drawn to Harrison's cause. In the Marxist mode, he criticized religion, a key spiritual element in the lives of a majority of African Americans, which likely limited his following. Further, he tended to have difficulty dealing with internal scuffles between organization members, leaving some satisfied and others not, and causing ruptures within his organizations. Although almost completely forgotten for ninety years, Harrison's story provides a window into a radical socialist take on Pan-Africanism often overlooked in studies of the Harlem Renaissance.

Moving to Harlem and the "Race problem"

From Harrison's arrival in the United States in 1900 to his first published article in the *New York Times* in 1907, Harrison spent countless hours pursuing his education, primarily through independent study. He actively participated in church lyceums for nearly a decade, developing essential skills for his future role as a Harlem community leader and

outspoken critic of people and institutions.³ John G. Jackson asserted that he remembered Harrison reading six books a day and speaking or reading nearly as many languages.⁴ Although Jackson's claim cannot be verified, the image reflected in his description illustrates how Harrison's colleagues held him as a man of the utmost intelligence and educational determination. Harrison studied politics, history, anthropology, science, evolution and law until he became a near expert in many fields, a true Renaissance man of the Harlem Renaissance.

During the period leading up to Harrison's role as a community leader, a mass migration took place of blacks from the Caribbean and the Southern United States to the American West, Midwest and Northeast. Many settled in Harlem, establishing dense concentrations of African-American and Afro-Caribbean communities, which coincided with a boom in creative, intellectual and radical-political energy.⁵ This mass migration provided the climate for radical political activism, so prevalent during the first half of the Harlem Renaissance, a time when Harrison was actively involved as a community leader and organizer.

During that period when Jim Crow continued to deprive African Americans of their rights, one of the most terrible atrocities against blacks was lynching and racist mob violence. In an article on the subject, Harrison displayed his classic cynical and sarcastic sense of humor. He wrote:

It is easy to win applause and approval among our people by charging every one of our shortcomings up to the white people. But, just the same, it isn't true. For instance: the white people instead of being responsible for color prejudice among us, have done their best to discourage it by calling us all the same contemptuous epithets and *by lynching and Jim Crowing us impartially*.⁶

Harrison kept these injustices in the forefront of his progressive Race First platform throughout his career. He fought to make lynching a federal crime

through organized lectures, conferences and petitions to the government. He criticized the NAACP viciously when the organization failed to back federal legislation against lynching. Later, however, the NAACP was instrumental in almost passing the Dyers Anti-Lynching Bill.⁷ Events such as the East St. Louis Race Riot of 1917, or as Harrison described it, "East St. Louis Massacre," were for him deeply moving. He spoke out against race violence, often advocating armed self-defense.⁸ Actions that violated natural rights as established in the United States Constitution could not be ignored, and his doctrine of Race First necessitated that African Americans could not ignore attacks against fellow blacks and their rights, especially their right to life.

Harrison, similar to other African-American leaders such as Washington, DuBois and Garvey, spread his uplifting message through lectures in universities and churches, along with popular street-corner oratories. His indoor and outdoor lectures inspired countless people who absorbed from his vast store of knowledge complex intellectual concepts and insightful criticisms of both government and society. He spoke to hundreds, sometimes thousands, in packed churches, libraries or street corners all throughout Harlem and New York, under the auspices of an instructor, political party representative, strike supporter, or inspired community leader. Often he set up at 135th Street and Lenox Avenue in the heart of Harlem, drawing on a vast knowledge of a wide array of subjects, teaching complicated topics in the simplest of terms. Commenting on Harrison's abilities, Socialist and activist Richard B. Moore noted that, "Hubert H. Harrison gave forth from his encyclopedic store, a wealth of knowledge of African history and culture which brought this consciousness to a very great height."⁹ The "consciousness" to which Moore referred suggested the intellectual explosion understood by observers and participants of the New Negro Movement to be associated with the Harlem Renaissance.

Henry Miller, author of *Tropic of Cancer* and a Socialist in his younger years, wrote enthusiastically of Harrison's brilliance and capacity as a street orator. "There was no one ... who could hold a candle to Hubert Harrison," Miller wrote; "he had the ability to demolish any opponent, [and] he was a man who electrified with his mere presence."¹⁰ Due to his role within the Harlem community and the brilliance of his lectures, many knew Harrison as the "Black Socrates," suggesting his erudition, eloquence and strength as an educator.¹¹

Harrison was a master of public ridicule, one of the hardest forms of criticism to defend against, and not a pleasant enemy. This capacity for virulent criticism earned Harrison many enemies, although he often had difficulty understanding why. During his youth he participated in lyceums where he became accustomed to separating debate from friendship. For Harrison the St. Benedict's lyceum, where he started, represented the seed which sprouted the intellectual fervor of the Harlem Renaissance.¹² Historian John G. Jackson describes a humorous moment in which Harrison dealt aptly with a rowdy audience member:

On one occasion, a young man, recently graduated from Harvard, attended one of Harrison's lectures. After the lecture the student asked a silly question; the lecturer replied with a silly answer. The youth became angry and told Harrison not to take him for a fool for he was highly educated, having recently finished Harvard. The lecturer replied that he could not have finished Harvard because it was still there. Then Harrison observed that when one graduates from a school the event is called Commencement Day. The student then was asked why he decided to finish on Commencement Day. Both laughter and applause followed, and the Harvard man was not pleased.¹³

In a similar, though perhaps more serious manner, Harrison could use his sharp wit to tear apart contemporary radical leaders, to their overwhelming

frustration. These dismayed community leaders had no interest in commemorating the legacy of Harrison, suggesting one reason why his name is not often included in African-American history.

In more private settings, Harrison taught classes to some of the brightest in the Harlem community. The linguist and Yale graduate William Pickens commented:

Harrison undoubtedly gives the most thought-provoking talks on history, literature, international politics and current topics, of all the forums and lectures being given in the city in any forum. Yet only a small number attend, and some of the most faithful attendants are white students and scholars.¹⁴

Harrison taught for the New York Board of Education and numerous other small venues throughout his life, often as a means to help care for his wife and five children when other means were less fruitful.

Harrison's informative and often subversive lectures attracted many in the black community. New York City police often attended with the stated intention of maintaining order. On several occasions confrontations erupted between police, Harrison's listeners, and aggressive bystanders. When police arrested Harrison, judges consistently ruled in his favor.¹⁵ In one case police took Harrison to jail for successfully fighting off an angry mob with the leg of a nearby table, yet the judge found Harrison had justly exercised self-defense.¹⁶ Being subversive in this period held great dangers that Harrison readily accepted.

At times Harrison used his strength as a public speaker to work as a voice of support and inspiration at union strikes. Harrison sympathized with the platform of the International Workers of the World, a radical organization for the rights of workers. Members included anarchists, communists, socialists and unionists of all political affiliations. The International Workers of the World (IWW) invited Harrison to give a

speech at the Paterson, New Jersey silk workers strike of 1913. For five months roughly 25,000 people took part in the strike. There Harrison gave a strong lecture against capitalism, making him stand out as the most radical as well as the only African American rally leader.¹⁷

In 1907, at the age of twenty-three, Harrison published his first piece, an editorial in the *New York Times* in the form of a literary critique.¹⁸ Suggesting his success as a journalist and social critic, Harrison later contributed to numerous periodicals including, but not limited to, *The Nation*, *Boston Chronicle*, *Chicago Defender*, *Modern Quarterly*, and *Opportunity Magazine*, as well as radical periodicals such as the *Negro World*, *the Call*, *the Messenger*, *the Liberator*, and *the Truth Seeker*. In addition, he edited and wrote in his own publications, *the Voice* and *the Voice of the Negro*. In print he addressed pertinent issues related to current events, criticisms, and ideology, from the U.S. invasion of Haiti, July 28, 1915, to "Socialism for the Negro."¹⁹ Harrison often even wrote critiques on literature. Perry asserts Harrison may be the "first black book reviewer in history."²⁰

Harrison believed literary and artistic projects were reflective of the psychology of a society, "a mirror of social situations."²¹ Philosopher Alain Locke supported a similar belief, demonstrated in his essential work on the Harlem Renaissance, *The New Negro* (1925), a compilation of artistic works showcasing the perceived boom in African American creativity.²² Harrison criticized the idea of a renaissance, a rebirth of African American artistic capability, instead promoting pride in the creative works of African Americans both past and present. Harrison, like Locke, used the arts to complement his understanding of civil society and specifically African-American culture.

Harrison's first book, *The Negro and the Nation* (1917), a compilation of previously published articles and editorials, demonstrated Harrison's

commitment to race and class radicalism. The book, initially running at 5,000 copies, sold in its entirety. Several copies made it as far as Russia where contemporary socialist radical Claude McKay, a close friend of Harrison, read the text during his time working with the Soviet government.²³ Through a diverse set of written works, Harrison's reached a large and varied reading audience.

Before becoming involved in the Socialist Party, Harrison worked as a postal clerk until 1911. Harrison believed he was fired because Booker T. Washington's "Tuskegee Machine" forced his termination after Harrison published two critical letters in the *New York Sun*.²⁴ If so, Harrison's dismissal likely involved Washington's assistant, Charles William Anderson. He wrote in a letter to Washington, "Please destroy this [letter] ... I will attend to Harrison. If he escapes me, he is a dandy."²⁵ Fortunately for students of history, Washington did not destroy the letter. The altercation suggests Harrison's capacity for drawing negative attention from prominent African-American leaders who feared his ability to sway public opinion. It seems the goal for Washington and Anderson was to make it difficult for Harrison to provide for himself, and thus less of a threat. As a result of losing his job, Harrison desperately needed another means of providing for his family, especially if he was going to maintain a comparable level of civic involvement.

Harrison next found work with the Socialist Party of the United States. Although he was an ideological socialist for most of his life, Harrison was directly involved with the Party for only a few years. From 1911 to 1914, Harrison actively worked as the leading black Socialist Party organizer in New York.²⁶ Harrison struggled for years with the Party for the "need of socialist propaganda" directed toward African Americans. Black Socialists numbered only in the thousands, and Harrison thought more available information would help swell their ranks. Harrison's efforts coincided

with an increase of 6,000 people who voted Socialist in Harlem. In part this increase may be attributable to Harrison lecturing and writing on the benefits of socialism and African American participation in unions as a counter for the inequality embedded in the traditional political, social, economic and educational spheres of American society.²⁷

He began to sense, however, that white Socialists running the Party were unwilling to address the needs of blacks in the United States, largely for fear of losing the Southern Socialist vote. Harrison argued that the black populace in the United States was the quintessential oppressed proletariat, that their situation required special acknowledgement, and that without addressing their unique case any significant progress toward a more socialist society would never be made. On the whole, the Party did not act on this idea. Realizing the Socialists would not move beyond a "color blind" policy, in Harrison's opinion a thin cover for maintaining white-supremacy, Harrison in 1914 renounced his membership. This decision signified a partial separation for Harrison from other American leftist movements as well as his move toward ideological independence.²⁸

Break from the Socialists

Harrison believed bonds between whites, regardless of economic status, were stronger than the bonds between working class blacks and whites. Supporting this claim, in one of Harrison's articles he quoted a speaker from a Socialist National Convention in the United States. The Socialist platform statement, agreed upon by prominent leaders, stated, "Race feeling is not so much a result of social as of biological evolution. ... We may temper this race feeling by education, but we can never hope to extinguish it altogether."²⁹ To combat the prevalence of "white first" ideology, African Americans and colored peoples of the globe needed to promote their own Race First ideology. In an article published in Garvey's

Negro World, for which Harrison worked as an editor although he never publically embraced Garveyism, Harrison wrote to the Socialist Party, "We say Race first, because you have all along insisted on [white] race first and class after when you didn't need our help."³⁰ For Harrison African-American solidarity would serve as a "source of salvation for the [African] race," from the devastating impacts of white-supremacy.³¹

As a Socialist, Harrison inspired a group of intellectuals and artists toward radical socialism. W.A. Domingo asserted that Garvey, A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, Cyril Briggs, Grace Campbell, Richard B. Moore and the other leading Black activists of their generation, "all followed Hubert Harrison."³² According to Richard B. Moore, as Harrison moved more toward his Race First ideology, the Afro-Caribbean and American radicals he inspired towards socialism did not follow his lead but further developed differing Socialist philosophies.³³ This is evidenced in the continuing socialist ideology of radicals such as Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, along with the development of the African Blood Brotherhood by Cyril Briggs, an African-American organization associated with the Communist Party of the United States.

In 1914, the year Harrison left the Socialist Party, World War I broke out, serving as both impetus and deterrent to progressive activism. President Woodrow Wilson, in his campaign to promote United States involvement in Europe, argued the need to defend democracy abroad. In his April 12, 1917, speech to Congress, Wilson asserted:

The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.³⁴

Many African Americans in turn demanded democracy in America for those living under the shadow of Jim Crow. On the one hand, President Woodrow Wilson's calls for defending democracy in Europe gave activists ammunition. They could call attention to the hypocrisy between the stated vision of democracy and the reality in the United States. On the other hand, the early twentieth century was characterized by government crackdowns on those with radical leanings, such as the trial of the Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, or the events of the first great Red Scare of 1919. Harrison reflected on this period and how his actions were limited by the political climate of World War I when he wrote:

those of us who saw unpalpable truths were compelled to do one of two things: either tell the truth as we saw it and go to jail, or camouflage that truth that we had to tell.... I was well aware that Woodrow Wilson's protestations of democracy were lying protestations, consciously and deliberately designed to deceive.... I chose to pretend that Woodrow Wilson meant what he said, because by so doing I safely held up to contempt and ridicule the undemocratic practices of his administration and the actions of his white countrymen in regard to the Negro.³⁵

After the war it became easier to criticize the government for the call to democracy abroad, and the conspicuous absence of democracy for African Americans at home.

Race First and the New Negro

In Harrison's article, "The Black Man's Burden," published one year after leaving the Socialist Party, he wrote about his conception of civil society, the ways in which white-supremacy affected African Americans and what blacks could do to counter it.³⁶ His article represents a transition from class consciousness with racial overtones toward racially focused radicalism, or what Harrison termed, Race First. This method of addressing

the problems of African Americans continued with Harrison throughout his life, largely based in an ongoing tradition of New Negro intellectual discourse. Although his philosophy in the political, economic, educational, and social spheres evolved over time, at the core of his espoused ideology lay the idea of the New Negro and race progress.

Likely Race First comes in part from “America first,” propagated during World War I. Indeed, initially Harrison coined the phrase “Africa first,” to represent his philosophy, but soon changed it to Race First which clarified his message, especially in light of his critique of pan-Africanism. With Race First, Harrison philosophized that white race consciousness existed in all facets of life in which whites involved themselves, from the KKK to the United States government to leftists and their organizations, and it was pragmatically necessary for blacks to respond in kind. In this sense, Race First does not equate to black supremacy or a form of counter-prejudice, although it did suggest a potential move in that direction. In a letter to Harrison dated January 14, 1927, Egmont Arens of *the New Masses* accused Harrison of “meeting Professor Dowd’s prejudice with a prejudice” of his own, based on two reviews that Harrison had sent to the paper.³⁷ Attacks such as this were rare. It seems that Race First was less a form of reverse prejudice than a call for acknowledgement of the color line for African Americans to practice political, economic, and, if necessary, physical self-defense.

A rich tradition of New Negro discourse formed the foundation for Harrison’s radical race and class philosophy. The idea of a New Negro was nascent in Emancipation and Reconstruction, booming during the Harlem Renaissance and ending with the onset of World War II. Proponents of the New Negro tradition asserted the need for willful re-creation of the African-American self and American society in the vein of other contemporary progressive traditions, philosophers, and movements such

as the Italian Futurists, Nietzsche with his concept of the *ubermensch* and the Russian Revolution of 1917.³⁸ Similar to other ideological currents, this perhaps suggests a fascinating relation of the New Negro with widespread progressive sentiment of the early twentieth century. The tradition of New Negro rhetoric, however, is a uniquely African American concept and therefore essential for better understanding Harrison's Race First ideology, which he so widely promoted in his lectures, rallies, and published works. An understanding of Harrison's ideas gives insight into more than solely his own philosophy but also into ideas held by a somewhat more difficult-to-define community of African American radicals spanning both place and time.

The idea of the New Negro implies a contrast to the "Old Negro," in both status and mentality, which intellectuals directly or indirectly addressed by elaborating definitions of both. Booker T. Washington, in distinguishing between the two, wrote that following Emancipation a large majority of white Americans saw blacks "as less than man and more than brute."³⁹ Putting the notion of the Old Negro in the context of white opinion suggests the need felt by some to demonstrate the admirable qualities of the New Negro in order to improve the white conception of African Americans, along with African Americans' self image. In the introduction to *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African-American Culture, 1892-1938*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett wrote:

And if "Zip Coon," "Sambo," and "Mammy" were thought to be stereotyped figments of racist minds, there was just enough lingering doubt about their capacities for progress for Washington and his cohorts to structure a manifesto directed as much at them as at sensitive, intelligent, and wealthy whites.⁴⁰

Aspects of the conceptualized Old Negro were varied. Some went so

far as to refute the Old Negro's existence, rather asserting an awakening or a finding of the African American self.⁴¹ Often the Old Negro concept served to contrast the goals of New Negro self-re-creation. The Old Negro in the United States experienced two hundred fifty years of slavery, repression and oppression. As slaves, the argument sometimes went, African-Americans needed to develop and maintain submissive, servant demeanors toward whites in order to survive.⁴² In the realms of economics, education, politics and society, the institution of slavery completely deprived enslaved African Americans of their rights, as understood today in much of western society and as exemplified in the United Nations "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" as the "inalienable rights of all members of the human family."⁴³ The New Negro rejected all things counter to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for African Americans present in the characterization of the Old Negro and in the oppressive society which continued to violate African Americans' basic rights.

This sense of the Old Negro's constitution is made more interesting by the presence of free African Americans dating back to the beginnings of North American slavery, reflecting the complexities often underlying group stereotypes. As a result, the Old and the New are often distinguished by beliefs and actions rather than historical inheritance. In the paradigm of New Negro discourse, as promoted by Harrison and others, New Negroes were independent, while Old Negroes were dependent; New Negroes sought education, Old Negroes were content with manual labor; New Negroes worked for economic strength in independent business or for collective strength found in unions, while Old Negroes labored under capitalist modes akin to slavery; New Negroes accepted nothing less than equality, while Old Negroes accepted inequality. Most importantly, for New Negroes the means always justified the ends when fighting against systemic and societal injustices.

In the simplest and most direct sense, progress was the central theme in New Negro ideology. In an editorial published in the September 4, 1917, edition of *the Voice*, an anonymous journalist predicted:

The world of the future will look upon the world of today as an essentially new turning point in the path of human progress. All over the world the spirit of democratic striving is making itself felt. The new issues have brought forth new ideas of freedom, politics, industry and society at large. The new Negro living in this new world is just as responsive to these new impulses as other people are.⁴⁴

Harrison and others sensed change on the horizon and were exceptionally optimistic for the coming future.

African-American women activists, like other female activists of the 1910s and 1920s, actively sought an expansion of their rights and a voice in politics and society. Harrison supported the expansion of their rights while understanding the complexities of their situation. Fannie Barrier Williams, a distinguished teacher and President of the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools, asserted that following emancipation African-American women needed to teach themselves domestic roles in a form vastly different from that of slavery. Colored women's clubs served as meeting places for African-American women to promote education and social uplift. Placing emphasis on the importance of progress for both men and women, Harrison taught members of Harlem women's organizations about politics, society and culture, all drawing from his encyclopedic mind.⁴⁵

Key to New Negro philosophy, and to Harrison, was the promotion of education as a tool for giving African Americans more potential for success. Harrison saw education as the most useful and necessary tool for progress, continuing a long tradition of post-bellum discourse concerning

the well being and future of African Americans. He believed the educational system in general did not provide for the instruction of the great majority of African Americans to be any more than industrial workers. Most blacks, therefore, were stuck with little exposure to higher education and lacked skills to move beyond their position. Harrison fervently disagreed with the argument that the majority of blacks were destined to work industrial or menial jobs and did not merit the same style of advanced education as whites. Harrison came into conflict with Booker T. Washington for his African-American educational program in the South. Harrison, as W.E.B. DuBois and other African-American intellectuals of the period, claimed that Washington's emphasis on industrial education was weak and would not empower African Americans in politics or business. For the masses to receive a higher level of education in diverse studies, the system needed to provide great equality of opportunity.

Booker T. Washington did significant work in establishing schools for the education and uplift of African Americans in the South, although his efforts received great criticism from African-American intellectuals. Ray Stannard Baker wrote about the divide between African-American radical intellectuals and the masses, further illuminating the separation between the prominent leaders, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, and their followers. Whereas Booker T. Washington pragmatically analyzed African Americans' situation and enacted a program for their uplift, DuBois refused to submit to discrimination and maintained a critical, aggressive attitude toward the wrongs of society.⁴⁶ Harrison fit strongly into the category of the latter.

For a time Harrison considered himself a supporter of W.E.B. DuBois, although DuBois and Harrison differed on issues of African-American education and progress. DuBois's "talented tenth" philosophy emphasized using those whom he considered the most skillful and qualified people in

African-American society to lead the rest to a brighter future. Harrison, in contrast, wrote, "the Common People are the real race," voicing his belief that the masses were capable of leadership and the exercise of their own creative will. Harrison adamantly disagreed with the idea of the "talented tenth." Remarkably similar to notions of the ideal American public educational system today, Harrison advocated schools in which all African Americans could receive an education allowing them to move beyond any sort of delegated industrial or agricultural roles.

Criticizing the American educational system directly in *The Negro and the Nation* (1920), Harrison attacked public school funding as applied to blacks in the United States. He compiled a large pool of data on the allocation of public school funds around the country and found African-American schools, compared to white schools, to be drastically underfunded. A study focused on counties located in Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia claimed African Americans actually paid more in taxes for education than what the government in turn allotted to black public schools. Worse yet, Harrison asserted, "in no modern country is education made to depend upon the tax-paying power of the parents. If that were so, the children of 40,000,000 American proletarians would live and die without schooling."⁴⁷ Harrison called for equality in the funding and form of public education across race and class lines in order to provide equal opportunities. To be separate and unequal did not equate with a healthy democracy.

In the meantime blacks could do everything within their power to self-educate, as Harrison himself did. He promoted education vigorously during his popular outdoor and indoor lectures. As historian J.A. Rogers has pointed out, Harrison inspired his listeners on at least one occasion to purchase "one hundred copies of a book on sociology at a dollar each, within an hour, on Lenox Avenue in Harlem."⁴⁸ This is a specific example

of Harrison's belief in progress developing from the masses. He promoted a bottom-up as opposed to a top-down ideology, favored by liberals such as DuBois.

Pan-Africanism in the context of Race First stressed ideas of global racial solidarity in economics, politics and society. Although not largely present in New Negro discourse until the arrival of Harrison and his contemporary Marcus Garvey, similar ideas resonated throughout African-American history, suggesting a continued connection with African cultural roots. Harrison found his Race First ideology potentially useful for blacks outside the United States, given the role of imperialism in oppressing Africans and other people of color. He argued for the enforcement of their natural democratic rights. Harrison demanded the United States and Great Britain apply democracy to all "colored people" of their empires, as leaders promoted in war propaganda. He also asserted that, while the rights of continental Africans were important, as a citizen of the United States the fight should center in America, not in Africa. Harrison emphasized that idea in the 1924 plan for his later organization, the International Colored Unity League. The ICUL called for the founding of a sovereign African-American state within the United States, contrasting Garvey's similar call for a new state set on the African continent.⁴⁹ Harrison wrote against atrocities the world over, but believed financial resources and efforts needed to be focused in the United States by African-American activists. That perspective later led Harrison to criticize Garvey for his Africa-centered program.

More than just race unity, Harrison's take on New Negro progress demanded independence from white oversight. Thus, even concerning white philanthropists such as E.D. Morel who fought against the atrocities Belgium committed in the Congo, Harrison wrote:

There are today many white men who will befriend the Negro,

who will give their dollars to his comfort and welfare, so long as the idea of what constitutes the comfort and welfare comes entirely from the white man's mind.⁵⁰

While in support of Morel's cause and others like it, Harrison wanted peoples of African descent to exercise direct agency. William Monroe Trotter, publisher, prominent voice within African-American politics and influence for W.E.B. DuBois, wrote a letter to Harrison in which he commended his "manliness" in establishing a sense of African-American pride and self-leadership. Praising Harrison, Trotter wrote:

You are fundamentally right in your attitude toward white help when you say we are not children, and, while we want all the friends we can get we need no benevolent dictators. It is we, not they, who must shape Negro policies. If they want to help in carrying them out we will appreciate their help.⁵¹

Harrison did not, however, shun relations with whites. Perhaps one of the most interesting sets of correspondence found in Harrison's papers at Columbia University is a collection of letters from Lothrop Stoddard from 1920 to 1922. One of Stoddard's most successful books was *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*, published in 1920,⁵² which contained elements of pseudo-scientific racism and suggested that ethnic groups were a threat to the supposed superiority of those of European descent. Surprisingly, Harrison and Stoddard maintained a cordial, almost friendly, written relationship based on intellectual respect. In one letter, Stoddard asked Harrison for advice in finding resources pertaining to "the Ethiopian or Pan-African Movement, in its broader aspects."⁵³ Harrison and Stoddard both shared the belief that colored people, especially those living within the sphere of western imperialist powers, were a rising threat to colonialism and white-supremacy, although they certainly disagreed on the implications. Stoddard saw this change as the end of a golden age;

Harrison believed this meant the salvation of oppressed peoples. Although much of Stoddard's work suggests racism, Harrison could maintain a beneficial relationship based on the mutual sharing of related but different ideas.

Black leaders such as Washington and later DuBois, Harrison claimed, benefited financially from white capitalists interested in the benefits of cheap laborers, thus influencing black leaders to not fight wholeheartedly for the political equality of their constituents.⁵⁴ In Harrison's eyes, Booker T. Washington's close cooperative relations with white politicians and capitalists and W.E.B. DuBois' dealings with the United States government exemplified these attempts by black leaders to establish personally lucrative positions at the expense of the needs of African Americans.

In "The Descent of DuBois," Harrison argued against DuBois's commitment to the many problems faced by blacks, accusing DuBois of changing from a credible leader to an accommodationist against African-American interests. In DuBois's article "Close Ranks," written during World War I, he called for blacks to fall in line behind the war movement by putting aside any "special grievances."⁵⁵ To Harrison this move signaled a weak, accommodationist shift in the leadership of DuBois. The "special grievances" which African Americans held included race inspired mob violence, Jim Crow laws, segregation, and lynching. For Harrison the issues against which African-American civil rights activists fought were too important to abandon, even during war.⁵⁶ Race First left no room for accommodation. Some historians agree DuBois likely published the article in order to gain a position as a captain in United States Military Intelligence.⁵⁷ Whether indeed DuBois wrote "Close Ranks" as a move to guarantee himself a military position may be unclear, but Harrison believed Major Walter Howard Loving of Military Intelligence used his article, "The Descent of DuBois," as an argument against bestowing upon DuBois

the captaincy. One week later Harrison published his letter, unedited, in *the Voice*.⁵⁸ Harrison believed his piece was vital in convincing officers in military intelligence that the credibility of DuBois had been compromised in the eyes of African Americans.

In his article, "To the Young Men of My Race," Harrison wrote to the youth of his day hoping that positive, strong leadership would emerge and be better than the flawed African-American leadership he so strongly criticized. Harrison's articles on that point suggest an acknowledgment of his inability to provide the strong leadership that he believed African Americans needed. Although DuBois still held great intellectual sway, with the passing of Booker T. Washington in 1915 a great leader of the African-American masses was lost. Historian Tony Martin has theorized that during the 1920s there was a leadership vacuum that Marcus Garvey effectively filled, becoming the leader of the largest movement in international African history.⁵⁹ While Harrison believed African Americans needed effective guidance to fill the void, he had strong issues with Garvey's plan and character and did not believe Garvey was the leader capable of effectively filling the position.

As with his call to all African Americans to seek out education, Harrison suggested that the new wave of leadership do the same. He told young potential black leaders, "Get [education] not only in school and in college, but in books and newspapers, in market-places, institutions, and movements. Prepare by knowing; and never think you know until you have listened to ten others who know differently-and have survived the shock."⁶⁰ Harrison found great flaws in the period's African-American leadership and felt education and a critical open-mindedness would be essential for the next generation of leaders.

Applying Race First economically, Harrison argued for economic unity and self sufficiency within African-American communities as a means of

promoting independence, power and subsequently civil rights.⁶¹ Harrison believed African Americans were too dependent on an economy controlled in large part by white capitalists. His criticisms were far from solely against whites. He felt certain black businessmen took advantage of black consumers willing to promote African American solidarity by shopping from local black businesses, regardless of quality of product. Businessmen who took advantage of other blacks by drastically raising prices were a disgrace in a community that needed to organize itself economically. To patronize other blacks was indeed necessary, and a businessman who did not take advantage of other African Americans exemplified the ideal.⁶² Economically, Harrison continued to argue from a Marxist perspective, but by drawing heavily from New Negro philosophy, contended that racial solidarity far outweighed that of class.

Harrison believed African Americans needed the right to vote, not as a privilege, but as a necessity, as “an instrument by which the people of a community express their will, their wants and their needs,” as a tool for a healthy democracy.⁶³ Harrison’s views on that point conflicted sharply with those of Booker T. Washington. Harrison accused Washington of doing too much to influence blacks “not to agitate for the ballot so long as they still ha[d] a chance to get work in the south.”⁶⁴ In his article, “The Black Man’s Burden,” Harrison targeted Booker T. Washington and his inadequate support for enfranchisement. As a result of Jim Crow legislation, Harrison wrote, in “Booker T. Washington’s state of Alabama, Montgomery [C]ounty, which has 53,000 Negroes, disfranchises all but one hundred of them.”⁶⁵ Harrison argued that the best way to protect economic status was found in the ballot because “the Negro, stripped of the ballot’s protection, holds the right to earn his bread at the mere sufferance of the whites.”⁶⁶ The struggle for the enfranchisement of blacks was central to Harrison’s platform.

This theme of blacks living at the “sufferance of whites,” led Harrison further to develop an emphasis on political autonomy for blacks when he radically called for the first all-black political party, the Black Liberty Party.⁶⁷ The goal was to unite African-American interests, illustrating Pan-African sentiment of the time. Harrison asserted that no major political party, whether Democratic, Republican, or Socialist, had a vested interest in working for the benefit of blacks. In reference to the widespread support of the Republican Party by African Americans and the need to form an all African-American Political Party, his editorial in the September 4, 1917, edition of *the Voice* asserted:

The new Negro race in America will not acheive [sic] political self-respect until it is in a position to organize itself as a politically independent party. ... This is what will happen in American politics. ... In the “good old days” it was quite easy to tell the Negro to follow in the foot-steps of those who had gone before. ... Things are different now.⁶⁸

Harrison’s proposed Black Liberty Party could have addressed the needs of African-Americans, advocating Race First as their primary policy.⁶⁹ It never came to fruition.

Harrison addressed religion often in print and in speech. Although his religious views remained outwardly agnostic from 1901 onward, in his private life he wrestled with an inclination toward Catholicism.⁷⁰ He respected the doctrine of faith over reason as the foundation of Catholic dogma.⁷¹ In public Harrison critiqued organized religion, specifically Christianity. In his 1920 argument against segregation in the United States, Harrison asserted, “[Negroes] may not go to the same church (although they are foolish enough to worship the same god) as white people.”⁷² As a proponent of free thought that put humanity, not God, as the focus of human experience, Harrison believed African Americans needed

not to worship any god, especially the God of Christianity. In this way, Harrison's treatment of Christianity coincides with his Race First doctrine. Many African Americans worshiped not an African god but the God of Christianity. Prefiguring Malcolm X, Harrison refused to follow what he saw as the god of white, western civilization. This mode of belief alienated potential followers whom Harrison may have come to understand better later.

Marking a change in his attitudes and reflecting the ways his relation to religion evolved over time, Harrison began to use biblical stories and references to support his arguments. In his 1924 article "The Common People," for example, Harrison suggested that God made the majority of humanity into commoners and sent Jesus not "to save the righteous," but the "sinners."⁷³ This marks a shift in Harrison's public position on religion by acknowledging the utility of biblical stories in communicating his message to the masses. Over the years, his public stance on religion shifted more than other aspect of his platform, from blatantly opposing to publicly acknowledging religion as legitimate. Several reasons could account for this shift. Possibly he began to understand the appeal and usefulness of religious analogy and hoped to bring more African Americans to his cause. With the change, he seemed to recognize that his former attitude had contributed to his loss of followers over the years. This adaptation of religious iconography could reflect his own personal doubts and inclination toward Catholicism. Likely he hoped to avoid alienating himself as he looked to unify African Americans through progressive organizations and the potential of an all African-American political party.

The Liberty League

Taking his experience gained from working as an organizer for the Socialist Party, Harrison founded the Liberty League of Negro Americans

in 1917 as an organization to put into action his New Negro ideas, promote race consciousness, and give blacks the opportunity to fight for democracy at home before doing so in Europe.⁷⁴ The Liberty League advocated the passage of legislation that made lynching a federal crime and the dismantling of the Jim Crow system. Before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, which enfranchised women in 1920, the organization advocated giving the vote to "every Negro man or woman who owe [sic] allegiance to our flag and obey our country's laws."⁷⁵ By 1916 Harrison began his plans for an African-American newspaper based on his Race First ideology and culminated in the premier Race First organization and its periodical. Harrison and other race conscious progressives of the New Negro Movement envisioned a world in which African Americans took part in the equality of the democratic ideal.

The Liberty League, founded June 12, 1917, began with great promise and lofty aspirations. The League served as a major organ for the propagation of ideas and the organization of the Harlem community, however short-lived, under League direction. Whether the organization reached its proposed goals initially remains unclear. At first glance the organization may seem a failure. It began with great promise and energy, but Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association quickly overshadowed the Liberty League. Furthermore, the League's demands went without positive response or improvement in the grievances of African Americans. Many factors worked against the potential for an organization such as the Liberty League to achieve its goals in the period forty-five years before the Civil Rights Movement. The accomplishments of Hubert Harrison and the Liberty League included spurring education and open criticism of institutions, while their failures could include the absence of other tangible improvements to the "race problem." Its failures may give deep insight into why history has forgotten Harrison.

To analyze the legacy of the Liberty League and to better understand Harrison's less acknowledged role in African-American history, a model developed by a life-long activist and organizer would serve well. Bill Moyer, a lead organizer in the Chicago Open Housing Movement and associated with the Civil Rights Movement in the American South during the 1950s and 1960s, developed a simple yet useful model to demonstrate the stages of social movements. Moyer defines social movements as, "collective actions in which the populace is alerted, educated, and mobilized ... to challenge the powerholders and the whole society to redress social problems or grievances."⁷⁶ Organizations within social movements are composed of local citizens who oppose present conditions and policies but do not yet have the support of the majority local population. "They represent the victims' perspective ... and ... carry out programs."⁷⁷ For the birth of a social movement, a minority of the population must perceive the issues as worsening. Criticism of those in power who support injustices is essential for a movement to grow. Because in the initial stages of social movements people are often unaware of the issues or feel powerless, education is imperative. Harrison's New Negro Movement sought to spread awareness and educate African Americans about their "special grievances," putting into action years of ideological debate. The Liberty League functioned as an organization to continue the tradition of African-American radicalism, while not following leaders or movements which seemed less radical, but instead seeking to be the new advance-guard breaking with the stagnant past.

While limited to Harlem, within the intellectual and artistic community the Liberty League enrolled hundreds of men and women. Known members included leaders from the Harlem community such as reverends, journalists, educators, and poets, as well as prominent black community leaders such as William Monroe Trotter, Cyril Briggs, Marcus Garvey and

W.A. Domingo.⁷⁸ As Perry has noted, "A listing of those who followed [Harrison's] lead reads like a virtual who's who list of Harlem's militant leaders over the next decade."⁷⁹ That significant cast of members reflects Harrison's success as an educator and source of inspiration for the radical Harlem community.

Harrison's paper *the Voice* and his organization the Liberty League began with a great deal of promise. John Edward Bruce, a noted African-American historian of the period, in a personal letter to Harrison elaborated on the potential of the Liberty League as well as suggested some potential factors against the League's success. Bruce wrote:

You are laying a foundation bigger than you perhaps realize in the formation of this Liberty League. [One] handicap at the very inception of the scheme is lack of co-workers with large vision ... unselfish patriotic men who have faith in your leadership... They never would have been heard of had you not evolved the scheme which is at once the most sane and practical of all that have been put forward in the past forty years. Your plan to go before congress with your race grievance is The Plan ... surround yourself with men loyal and true... to help make you what nature has destined you to be ... a courageous leader of your people taken from the ranks where all real leaders should come.⁸⁰

Harrison and hundreds of community members totaling 2,000 people met at the Mother Bethel AME Church June 12, 1917, for the birth of the Liberty League. People packed into the church, drawn in by Harlem advertisements and Harrison's reputation as a powerful speaker with an important Race First message. At that moment Harrison was arguably at his peak in popularity and influence as a result of his well attended lectures and soapbox oratories, making him a strong candidate for the leader of a radical organization in Harlem such as the Liberty League.⁸¹ Despite Harrison's prowess as a public speaker, Marcus Garvey's movement,

the UNIA, quickly overcame the League. Introduced by Harrison to his first major audience at the Liberty League's first meeting, Garvey, then a member of the Liberty League, more or less "stole the show," according to biographer Tony Martin.⁸² Perry argues Harrison was a better orator than Garvey, and subsequently, Garvey's prowess as a speaker could not account for his sweeping popularity.⁸³ Nevertheless, many members of the Liberty League joined the UNIA and Garvey. This event demonstrates a theme in Harrison's life: while Harrison created organizations to articulate his powerful Race First ideas, he lacked certain leadership skills necessary to maintain a following, and the organizations were generally short lived.

At the first meeting, the Liberty League successfully established its demands, a key first step in founding a successful civil rights organization. These demands were elegantly simple, direct, and dire, largely based on Harrison's Race First philosophy and a rich tradition of New Negro discourse. Harrison and the members of the Liberty League promoted a platform in which the main evils against the realization of democracy for African Americans were segregation, Jim Crow laws, and lynching.⁸⁴ Members of the Liberty League and Harrison believed separate but equal institutions were a sham, and Jim Crow laws limiting voting rights ran contrary to the ideas within American democracy. Harrison and those who joined the Liberty League organized because they felt the need for an organization more radical than the NAACP. Harrison referred to NAACP inaction as he advocated federal legislation against lynching.⁸⁵ Writing about that period, historian Robert Zangrando asserted that, "The NAACP actually declined to make an open push for either the Dyer or Moores bill on grounds that the measures were not constitutional." In the NAACP's defense, Zangrando noted that "This was the [NAACP]'s first formal confrontation with congressional antilynching legislation, and it was clearly feeling its way."⁸⁶ Although the NAACP later became a strong

advocate for federal antilynching legislation, in 1917 members of the Liberty League saw themselves as a necessary organization, more radical than the NAACP.

[T]he *Voice*, the primary periodical of the Liberty League, began with the great potential of reshaping the political consciousness in Harlem. On July 4, 1917, one month after the founding of the Liberty League, the organization launched its periodical. No doubt the Liberty League chose July 4th as the launch date to symbolize the democratic ideals for which the periodical stood. Publication began at 2305 Seventh Avenue in Harlem. As a periodical similar to the NAACP's *Crisis*, the Socialist Party's *the Call* or Marcus Garvey's (later) *Negro World*, *the Voice* existed to help spread the demands and message of the Liberty League, draw membership and financial support for the League, and educate the masses of African Americans with access to the paper.

[T]he *Voice* had weekly sales of 11,000 at its peak, and an estimated five times that in readers.⁸⁷ In comparison, The *Negro World*, the periodical of Garvey's UNIA, had a readership of 200,000 weekly in the same period, DuBois' *the Crisis* had 25,000 weekly, and the *Messenger* put out by black Socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen reached about 26,000.⁸⁸ Although the readership of *the Voice* was few compared to the *Negro World* (11,000 sold a week versus 200,000), when taking into account that the well-known *Crisis* of the NAACP sold roughly 25,000 a week versus *the Voice*'s 11,000 a week, and considering the relative obscurity of *the Voice* today, the readership becomes more impressive. Harrison believed that with his role as an editor independent of campaign or politically related funding, *the Voice* could truthfully address issues without needing to meet a party agenda. He also believed the Harlem community would support a periodical with a Race First platform in order to rise above party divisions among African Americans.⁸⁹ While a minority of African Americans did

appreciate Harrison and *the Voice*'s take on black progressivism, the appeal of Garveyism and the *Negro World* in the end garnered far more support.

To maintain ideological independence and promote African-American pride while raising funds, *the Voice* attempted a funding style in line with its socialist, race conscious platform, a factor that may have contributed to its eventual decline. The money for *the Voice* came solely from stockholders, advertisements, and paper sales, but Harrison refused to accept advertisements he considered degrading, such as advertisements for skin lightening and hair straightening products. Harrison believed those cosmetics demonstrated a sense of shame of African heritage by those who used them. Harrison's decisions suggest a judgment perhaps founded less on analysis and more on Race First ideology. Shane and Graham White have written that:

It was not so much that most African Americans who used cosmetic preparations wanted to look white; it was more often the case that they wanted the same freedom to construct their appearance that whites were allowed.⁹⁰

The desire to shed oneself of racial heritage ran completely contrary to Harrison's Race First message, so he was very critical of cosmetic alteration.

The Liberty League held dances to raise funds for *the Voice*. One dance held December 6, 1917, brought in a great deal of money, only to match the excessive costs of the dance itself.⁹¹ Neither did stockholders come out in great numbers despite writers of *the Voice* asking for support.⁹² Harrison lamented, in private, the absence of rich black businessmen in funding the League and its periodical. In the end, monetary contributions from the many different sources proved inadequate, and financial issues constantly plagued *the Voice*.

[T]he *Voice* ran into issues with competition from other radical

African-American periodicals of the period, contributing to its eventual split. The Beehive Printing Company, which published the paper weekly on Tuesdays, may have been pressured by the *Age* and the *New York News* to move *the Voice's* publishing date back to Wednesday, while allowing the *Age* and the *New York News* to continue on a Tuesday schedule. Although Harrison objected, there was little he could do as the head of a much smaller and much weaker periodical. Harrison viewed the later publication date as damaging to the paper's power and as a threat to its success. The inability of the Liberty League to control the publication date for *the Voice* reflected the difficulty of the small periodical to compete with the more powerful interests that held sway at the Beehive Printing Co.⁹³

Harrison cared little for money and as a result did a poor job managing his finances and creating tensions that limited his success in his professional and personal life. This inability to handle money effectively created tensions within the Liberty League and *the Voice*, eventually leading to a split within the League. Journalists, as members of the Liberty League, produced a new periodical for the organization, *the Clarion*. The split does not appear to have happened on hostile terms, for articles published in *the Clarion* included pieces written by Harrison. Topics in both papers came from the Liberty League's Race First platform. *The Clarion*, for example, published an advertisement promoting a meeting for *the Voice* in the August 15, 1917, edition.⁹⁴ For a year both papers existed simultaneously as organs for the Liberty League. Eventually *the Voice* failed, leaving just *the Clarion*, which (as though trying to confuse later students of history with more names) then changed its name to *The New Negro*. As *The New Negro* was a paper for the Liberty League, Harrison was still president, and he became the editor for the League's *The New Negro* until it too collapsed.

To gain public support in its initial stages, a movement must prove the

existence of a problem and establish those in power to be at fault. This the Liberty League did in mass meetings, lectures, street oratories, and through *the Voice*. The major adversaries established by the League included accommodationist African American leadership, President Woodrow Wilson, and the United States government, which acted as blocks to the elimination of systemic injustice demanded by New Negroes.

For the Liberty League's first act of criticism, the organization sent to the United States Congress a letter of their demands, which John E. Bruce called "the Plan" for addressing the "race problem."⁹⁵ This was the first measure of the League's effectiveness, yet the letter went unanswered. Bill Moyer wrote that in the beginning stages of social movements, activists needed to do everything to work within the system to demonstrate that the system will not resolve the issues. Thus, the organization spurs more support for the social movement, promotes knowledge of the issues and makes those in power look guilty of promoting injustice.⁹⁶ As such, the lack of response at this point, early in the movement, was not only acceptable but entirely natural and potentially beneficial. The League then sent other demands to Congress, such as a letter following the East St. Louis Race Riot demanding an unbiased investigation of the tragic events that transpired.⁹⁷

The East St. Louis Riot, or the "East St. Louis Massacre," was the most violent of the many race riots of the period. [*T*]*he Voice* ran Harrison's article documenting the events, criticizing powerholders' and the media's support of white violence, and supporting fellow African Americans who fought against the white rioters. Published in the July 4th *Voice* one day after the riot took place, Harrison spoke of a growing "temper" developing within African-American communities across the nation, much like the growing race consciousness of the New Negro Movement, or the "Rising Tide" predicted by Lothrop Stoddard. Harrison suggested, "If white men

are to kill unoffending Negroes, Negroes must kill white men in defense of their lives and property.” Furthermore, *the Voice* advocated a boycott of white businesses, ending with the hope that as atrocious as the East St. Louis Riot was, perhaps more blacks would now join the Liberty League. Harrison emphasized that the League “was organized to take practical steps to help our people all over the land in protection of their lives and liberties.”⁹⁸ Estimates for the number of African-American men, women and children who died in the riots range from a low of one hundred to a high of three hundred. Seven thousand were forced to flee East St. Louis by swimming across the Missouri River with the clothes on their backs to escape for their lives.⁹⁹

Perhaps the most controversial act of the Liberty League, prefiguring Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, was the call for armed self defense in light of race riots. During these violent clashes, blacks were disproportionately killed and injured by white rioters. In the July 10th edition of *the Voice*, the paper reprinted an article initially published in the *New York Times* entitled, “Urges Negroes to Get Arms, Liberty League President Advises His Race to ‘Defend Their Lives.’” The article concerned a rally following the East St. Louis Riots which took place at the Metropolitan Baptist Church on 138th and Lenox in Harlem, where a thousand African-Americans gathered to hear Harrison speak. The paper ran a powerful clip from Harrison’s speech:

We intend to fight if we must ... for the things dearest to us, for our hearths and homes. Certainly I would encourage the Negeoes [sic] in the South, or in East St. Louis, or anywhere else who do not enjoy the protection of the law, to arm for their own defense, to hide those arms, and to learn how to use them, and I would gladly encourage the collection of funds to buy rifles for those who cannot obtain them for themselves. We Negroes in New York cannot afford to lie down in the face of this proposition. This thing

in East St. Louis touches us too nearly. We must demand justice, and we must make our voices heard.¹⁰⁰

Harrison's call for armed defense is reminiscent of other plans for armed action in African-American history with dire situations, such as the Nat Turner Rebellion or John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. In activism the use of violence versus the advocacy of peace often divides people who may otherwise fight for similar goals. Moyer criticizes the negative impact of armed resistance both morally and empirically, writing, "Movement violence, rebelliousness, and seeming anti-Americanism turn people off and tend to frighten them into supporting powerholders' policies, police actions and status quo."¹⁰¹ An advocacy of armed defense no doubt drove away some potential supporters of the Liberty League. However, as evidenced historically by other armed movements, this point does not necessitate the Liberty League's decline, but could still present a contributing factor in its deterioration.

The Gradual Decline of the Liberty League and the Rise of Marcus Garvey

Marcus Garvey founded the UNIA in 1914, three years before the Liberty League. His organization was minimal and still developing before its relocation from Jamaica to Harlem. This move followed almost immediately his introduction to the Harlem community at the June 12, 1917, meeting that launched the Liberty League. Although Garvey founded the UNIA before the Liberty League formed, it took the Harlem activist community, in no small part inspired by Harrison and his organization, for the UNIA to truly blossom into an internationally successful organization claiming millions of members. The UNIA became, according to historian Winston James, "the largest black organization the world had ever known."¹⁰²

Although Harrison was reputedly the better speaker at the first Liberty League meeting, Garvey, too, received praise for his outstanding oratory. After the meeting many members of the Liberty League began a move toward the UNIA, becoming members of both organizations. Harrison resisted ever joining the UNIA and remained a critic of the organization's policies. W.A. Domingo, the first assistant secretary of the Liberty League, was one of the initial members to abandon the League for the UNIA. Purportedly Domingo also advised Garvey to avoid Harrison's organization.¹⁰³ Garvey's lack of support for the Liberty League no doubt played a major role in the brevity of the organization. Whether Domingo's recommendation to avoid Harrison's organization played a major role in Garvey's decision, as the leader of his own international organization Garvey indeed chose not to work with or through the much smaller Liberty League. Supposedly Garvey even went as far as to schedule UNIA meetings to conflict with the scheduled Liberty League meetings. Jeffrey Perry writes:

According to Liberty League member J. Domminick Simmons, Garvey had approached Mr. Bright, the caretaker of Lafayette Hall, and purposely tried to schedule his meetings to conflict with Harrison's.¹⁰⁴

Many other important members of the Liberty League moved toward the UNIA as it grew. Liberty League members who joined the UNIA could hold memberships in both organizations simultaneously, making the move more gradual than abrupt. Irena Moorman-Blackston, who worked selling copies of *the Voice*, became the head of the women's division of the UNIA in Harlem and the UNIA's first vice-president.¹⁰⁵ Edgar Grey, who served as a secretary of the Liberty League, became general secretary of the UNIA, business manager of the *Negro World*, and an assistant secretary in the Black Star Line, the shipping and cruise line of the UNIA.¹⁰⁶ Harrison

never officially joined the UNIA and throughout the latter years of his life remained largely critical of Marcus Garvey, although he did become an assistant editor of the *Negro World*, the UNIA's major periodical.¹⁰⁷ Later Harrison became only a contributing editor, possibly signaling an attempt by Garvey to keep potential adversaries close at hand while depriving Harrison of influence within the *Negro World*.

Harrison worked for the *Negro World* from 1920 to 1922 following the collapse of his periodical, *the Voice*.¹⁰⁸ There he continued to spread his message for the need of race and class solidarity. Throughout this period Harrison became increasingly hostile in his speeches and articles toward Garvey, although never attacking Garvey outright. In Harrison's diary he wrote vehemently against Garvey, clearly demonstrating the enmity between the two.¹⁰⁹ Their relationship was complex. In a letter from Military Intelligence investigator C.B. Weeks to his director, Weeks wrote, "Garvey is afraid to dismiss him."¹¹⁰ His fear likely stemmed from Harrison's strength as a critic and influential leader in the Harlem community.

Harrison felt that Garvey acquired most of his effective ideas for the UNIA from tenets of the Liberty League and Harrison's Race First ideology. The sharing of ideas between the two was to an extent mutual. Harrison and Garvey held a common ground in their treatment of Pan-African race solidarity. Both believed it would be the masses, not the privileged few, who would lead the path toward a future free of the shackles imposed by white-supremacy. Because of their similar doctrines, as time went on and they refined their ideas, Garvey borrowed concepts from Harrison and vice versa. While Garvey promoted the idea of Race First and included it in the UNIA platform, Harrison built off the idea of blacks "returning" to Africa to establish a new government. Harrison, following his strict adherence to the idea that the problems of blacks needed to be solved in North America

and not Africa, suggested the formulation of a sovereign nation of African Americans within the United States. This was proposed in the declaration of the International Colored Unity League, Harrison's second Race First organization, a few years before his death.¹¹¹

Harrison continued to refer to himself as president of the Liberty League up until 1923, reflecting his continued interest in the organization and his refusal to join the UNIA. Although the Liberty League never officially disbanded, after the initial boom of the 1917 launch, the League faded into obscurity. In spite of the organization's decline, he continued to refer to himself in print as "Hubert H. Harrison, President of the Liberty League."¹¹² While Harrison worked for the *Negro World*, he still associated with the Liberty League, preferring the presidency of his own organization than working under the auspices of Garvey.

As a result of Harrison's work with the *Negro World*, as an editor and columnist he made connections with people from all over the world. He may have used this as a means to promote the Liberty League, further avoiding and potentially undermining the UNIA. Harrison received a letter dated February 8, 1921, from a J.P. Williams of the Gold Coast. Williams led a club dedicated to education and international exchange of correspondence between people of color, a Pan-African connection. Williams acknowledged he admired Harrison's articles from the *Negro World*. He then requested information about the UNIA and the Black Star Line as well as any reading material which could be lent or gifted. The next letter to Harrison is insightful. Dated November 6, 1921, Williams thanked Harrison for his response of August 30 and the materials he provided. He wrote:

The idea of the average African at home is that nothing of importance can begin locally, its inception must be from the White man's country. Therefore I am of opinion that The Liberty League

given the necessary publication may succeed. I wouldn't mind devoting some time in writing and preaching the object of the League should I be armed with the necessary authorization.¹¹³

Williams then described a plan which could have excited Harrison. In response to Harrison's suggestion to start "an international monthly magazine" to promote Williams' organization, Williams asserted that he would make the magazine "the organ and property of The Liberty League." Whether the Gold Coast paper came to fruition is unclear, but it is unlikely considering the absence of further documentation. Harrison never joined the UNIA, and clearly, during his time while working as contributing editor for the *Negro World*, he continued to promote his own organization locally and abroad. A critic of Garveyism, Harrison used his connections with the *Negro World* to undermine the UNIA from the inside.

Harrison's program of economic solidarity compared favorably to economic ideas promoted by Marcus Garvey, but Harrison disagreed with Garvey's specific economic practices. Garvey ran into a great deal of trouble when accusations emerged concerning mail fraud promoting the UNIA's Black Star Line. In the Bureau of Investigation's case against Marcus Garvey, the United States government attempted to undermine the Garveyist movement, and Harrison, also hoping to undermine Garvey, contributed wholeheartedly to the investigation. Documents written by an undercover agent to his investigation supervisor clearly show that Harrison cooperated with federal agent "800." To agent 800 Harrison revealed documents he had collected with the intention of using them against Garvey all along.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, Harrison provided 800 with a list of potential informants and people willing to testify in court.¹¹⁵ This altercation demonstrates the most extreme extent to which Harrison worked against Garvey and the UNIA.

The ICUL and a Leader Lost

In 1924 Harrison founded what became his last civil rights organization, the International Colored Unity League. Harking back to the days of the Liberty League, the new ICUL published in the organization's new paper, *The Voice of the Negro*, a program of the founding principles of the organization. This new program heralded some major changes from the Liberty League platform from seven years prior. The organization hoped to bridge the gaps between factions, uniting for the benefit of African Americans in dealing with the "race problem" and effectively forgoing criticism of other African-American leaders and movements. Marking a drastic change in his public stance on religion, Harrison acknowledged that "the Negro Church ... has done more for the education and spiritual uplift of the masses than any other agency in the race." In making this acknowledgement, the ICUL planned to "work in friendly and active co-operation" with the church and all other African-American periodicals and organizations. The most radical call by Harrison in the ICUL was for the founding of an African-American "state or states" within the borders of the United States.¹¹⁶ Harrison seemed to have accepted the idea of a new African state, an idea core to Garveyism, yet adapted this idea to fit with his emphasis on solving the "race problem" in the United States. This could also signal disillusion on Harrison's part concerning the capacity for American society to change quickly enough for African Americans to gain their civil rights in his lifetime. Throughout the document, Harrison consistently emphasized the role of the masses in solving the many problems African Americans faced, a core aspect of his Race First philosophy that he maintained his entire life. Although the ICUL did not experience the same level of initial popularity as the Liberty League, the 1924 ICUL program demonstrated Harrison's years of gained experience since 1917. However, it seems Harrison's influence at this point had greatly diminished in the

Harlem community.

Harrison's life came to a tragic end December 17, 1927, when he was only forty-four years old. Letters suggest he had been in poor health for some time leading up to his death. Following complications during surgery to remove his appendix, Harrison died. Thousands attended his funeral in Harlem.¹¹⁷ A. Philip Randolph wrote a letter to Harrison's wife Lin on behalf of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.¹¹⁸ Randolph expressed a sense of loss with Harrison's passing and wrote:

Permit me to offer you, in your hour of deep bereavement over the loss of your dear husband, Mr. Hubert H. Harrison, our comrade and co-fighter for race justice, my sincere condolences. May I trust that you will bear up under your heavy burden, conscious of the fact that he has made an enduring and valuable contribution to the life of the Negro of New York in particular, and the world in general.¹¹⁹

Randolph's letter also suggests the "heavy burden" which Mrs. Harrison inherited with the death of her husband. Money had always been tight in the Harrison household, and now Lin Harrison needed to care for the five children left behind.¹²⁰

Several efforts to commemorate the legacy of Harrison were tried. In Harrison's honor the Harlem Community Church, founded in 1920, changed its name to the Hubert H. Harrison Memorial Church. Lin Harrison received numerous letters from Egbert E. Brown, the church founder, and appears to have developed an active relationship with the church.¹²¹ Ten years later the church changed its name to the Harlem Unitarian Church, but today the building no longer stands. The 135th Street Public Library, which Harrison helped establish with Arthur Schomburg, had a portrait of Harrison, which has since gone missing. His grave in the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx is unmarked, and his death was followed by an

“ominous silence.”¹²² As a critic, Harrison made a great deal of enemies. His legacy was not promoted in the African-American periodicals of the period, nor recognized by the many institutions he criticized. The recovery work initiated by Jeffrey Perry has served to commemorate the legacy of Hubert Harrison, long forgotten over the last eighty years.

Hubert H. Harrison's greatest legacy remains the people he inspired while fighting against white supremacy. Oscar J. Benson wrote, “[Harrison's] biography ... [cannot be written], unless it be culled from the influence his teachings had upon the lives of others.”¹²³ Harrison's Race First ideology heard on street-corners, in churches, libraries and schools, or read in radical and mainstream periodicals inspired the Harlem community and influential radical contemporaries such as A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, Richard B. Moore, W.A. Domingo and Marcus Garvey. Randolph went to the extreme of calling Harrison the “Father of Harlem radicalism” because of his legacy and influence.¹²⁴ Harrison built Race First organizations twice, once in 1917 with the Liberty League and again in 1924 with the International Colored Unity League. His activism led him into conflict with clear oppositional forces such as the United States government and white-supremacists, as well as numerous other African-American activists. His greatest conflict was with Marcus Garvey, leader of the largest Pan-African movement in world history, and in terms of platform, Harrison's closest contemporary. Clearly disproving of, and perhaps threatened by Garveyism, he attempted to undermine the UNIA. Although over time Harrison has fallen into relative obscurity, recent scholarly interest by historians such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and most notably Jeffrey B. Perry, with his as yet incomplete two-volume Harrison biography, will serve to reinvigorate Harrison's legacy as one of the most influential radical leaders in the first half of the Harlem Renaissance.

Notes

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- 3 Perry, *Hubert Harrison*, 70-78.
- 4 John Jackson, "Hubert Henry Harrison: The Black Socrates," *American Atheists*, February 1987, http://www.atheists.org/Hubert_Henry_Harrison:_The_Black_Socrates_.
- 5 Alferdteen Harrison, *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991).
- 6 Hubert Harrison, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Perry (Middletown Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 405.
- 7 William Hixson, "Moorfield Storey and the Defense of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill," *New England Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1969): 65.
- 8 Harrison, "The East St. Louis Horror," *the Voice* (July 4, 1917), in Perry, *Hubert Harrison Reader*, 94.
- 9 Richard Moore, Richard B. Moore, *Caribbean Militant in Harlem: Collected Writings, 1920-1972*, eds. W. Burghardt Turner and Joyce Moore Turner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 166.
- 10 Perry, *Hubert Harrison*, 225. For more citations in praise of Harrison's oratorical abilities refer to Perry, *Hubert Harrison*, 244-245.
- 11 Jackson, "Hubert Henry Harrison: The Black Socrates."
- 12 Perry, *Hubert Harrison*, 72.
- 13 Jackson, "Hubert Henry Harrison: The Black Socrates."
- 14 William Pickens, "Letter to [Ernest R. Crandall?]," Undated , 3:8, *Hubert Harrison Papers*.
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- 16 *Ibid.*, 224.

- 17 Harrison, *Black Exodus*.
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- 19 Hubert Harrison, *When Africa Awakes* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1997), 104; Hubert Harrison, *The Negro and the Nation* (New York: Cosmo-advocate Pub. Co., 1917), 21.
- 20 Perry, Hubert Harrison, 254.
- 21 *Ibid.*
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- 23 Perry, Hubert Harrison, 321.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 130.
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- 30 Harrison, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, 89.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 32 W.A. Domingo, interview with Theodore Draper, January 18, 1958, New York, Theodore Draper Papers, Robert W. Woodruff Library for Advanced Studies, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, Preliminary listing as Box 20, Folder 7, "Negro Question for Vol. 1 (cont.)," Notes re: W. A. Domingo, 2. In Perry, "Hubert Harrison (1883–1927)," 3.
- 33 Moore, Richard B. Moore, *Caribbean Militant in Harlem*, 216.

- 34 Woodrow Wilson, "Making the World 'Safe for Democracy': Woodrow Wilson Asks for War" (Presidential Speech presented at the Joint Session of Congress, United States Congress, Washington D.C., April 2, 1917), <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4943/>.
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- 40 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett, *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 12.
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- 42 See for example Wright, "The New Negro (1894)"; Washington, "Afro-American Education (1900)"; John Henry Adams, Jr., "Rough Sketches: The New Negro Man (1904)," in *The New Negro: Readings on Race,*

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- 46 Ray Stannard Baker, "An Ostracized Race in Ferment: The Conflict of Negro Parties and Negro Leaders Over Methods of Dealing with Their Own Problem (1908)," in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 69.
- 47 Harrison, *The Negro and the Nation*, 14.
- 48 Harrison, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, 406.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 399-402.
- 50 Hubert Harrison, "Our White Friends," *Negro World* 8 (July 3, 1920): 2, in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, edited by Jeffrey B. Perry (Middletown Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 181. See for example Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Updated ed. (London: Pan, 2006).
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- 55 Du Bois, W.E.B., "Close Ranks," *The Crisis*, July 1918.
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- 57 See for example Mark Ellis, "'Closing Ranks' And 'Seeking Honors': W.E.B. Du Bois in World War I," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 1

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- 60 Harrison, *When Africa Awakes*, 93.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 62 Harrison, *The Negro and the Nation*, 87.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 5.
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- 65 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 66 Harrison, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, 66.
- 67 Perry, *Hubert Harrison*, 11.
- 68 "The New Policies for the New Negro."
- 69 Perry, "Hubert Harrison (1883-1927)," 121.
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- 71 *Ibid.*, 106.
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- 73 Harrison, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, 404.
- 74 Harrison, *When Africa Awakes*, 9.
- 75 Harrison, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, 92.
- 76 Bill Moyer, *The Movement Action Plan*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Social Movement Empowerment Project, 1987), 3.
- 77 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 78 Perry, *Hubert Harrison*, 314-7.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 314.

- 80 John Edward Bruce, "John Edward Bruce to Hubert Harrison," August 2, 1917, 1:18, Hubert Harrison Papers.
- 81 Perry, Hubert Harrison, 283; Martin, Marcus Garvey, Hero, 43; Harrison, A Hubert Harrison Reader, 86-88.
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- 83 Perry, Hubert Harrison, 294.
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- 92 "the Voice Speaks to the Business Man" (Harlem, New York City, August 14, 1917).
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