

that standpoint, Naison's memoir grows in importance. It has raised some crucial issues, many of which go to the heart of the continuing search for racial justice and interracial unity. It should be read widely and debated vigorously.

MARK SOLOMON

*Department of History
Simmons College
300 The Fenway
Boston, MA 02115
solomonm@aol.com*

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THE REDISCOVERED BRILLIANCE OF HUBERT HARRISON

A Hubert Harrison Reader is a triumph of recovery and scholarship.* Hubert Harrison (1883–1927), historian Jeffrey B. Perry has proven conclusively, was an outspoken, perspicacious, cultured thinker utterly undeserving of the fog that has obscured his memory.¹ Perry's stellar introduction and extensive annotations make this an erudite edition. Featuring no fewer than 138 of Harrison's writings, this omnibus will forever alter historical understanding of the movements through which Harrison passed in the first three decades of the 20th century, in particular the Socialist Party and "New Negro" militancy.

* *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, edited with introduction and notes by Jeffrey B. Perry. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. \$70.00; paper, \$24.95. Pp. 473.

1 Harrison is not entirely forgotten, but familiarity with him seems limited to select scholars of black history. Perry's references include comments on Harrison by J. A. Rogers, Ernest Allen, Jr., Winston James, and Robert Hill, among others. However, it is indicative of the insecure status of Harrison that the most comprehensive examination of black socialist theory, Robinson (1983), makes no mention of him. It may be that Harrison is coming back into wider view. Not only has this reader appeared, bringing long-unavailable writings back into print, but Harrison occupies a significant place in Kevin Gaines' award-winning history of black political thought in the early 20th century, in which Harrison stands as an exception to the dominant black elite tradition of "uplift" that relied upon pejorative conceptions of racial pathology and moral admonition rather than a political program of civil rights and social justice (Gaines, 1996). Harrison is also the subject of a short article in the second edition of *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Bair, 1998); the first edition, in 1990, did not accord him so much as an index entry.

Born on the island of Saint Croix to parents of Afro-Caribbean descent, Harrison emigrated to New York City in 1900 at age 17 after the death of his mother left him an orphan. The United States was more racist in structure and beliefs than the West Indies, and as an impoverished immigrant Harrison struggled in his new environs. As he gained surer cultural footing, Harrison grew into a formidable writer who blazed a pathway for Harlem militancy.

Harrison's first publication included here, a 1904 letter to the editor, took exception to a *New York Times* editorial claiming that a case of chicken stealing revealed a propensity to vice innate in the whole of the black race. The stereotypes and prejudices of Jim Crow America were not Harrison's only mark. Across time, Harrison elaborated a political and cultural outlook that challenged the nostrums of virtually every leading black figure of his day.

Booker T. Washington he referred to, slyly, as "a great leader, by the grace of the white people who elect colored people's leaders for them" (166), and he eschewed Washington's property-centered conservatism in favor of uncompromising political action. W. E. B. Du Bois' "Talented Tenth," pilloried by Harrison as the "Subsidized Sixth" (111), he rejected in favor of mass action. A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen's "class first" outlook he supplanted with race consciousness. Marcus Garvey's back-to-Africa vision he considered irrelevant to the essential task of American transformation. Harrison, it may be said, was not simply a fascinating radical black writer. He was one of the few social critics of the 20th century who truly let their judgment take them wherever it might lead, damn the consequences.

After publishing a letter in the *New York Sun* in 1910 critical of Washington (164–166), Harrison became a victim of Washington's far-reaching patronage connections and lost his postal job. He became a Socialist Party staff organizer and America's foremost black Socialist. He initiated a Colored Socialist Club, campaigned and spoke for Eugene V. Debs in 1912, served as a subeditor of *The Masses*, and wrote articles for the *International Socialist Review* and *New York Call* on subjects like "The Negro and Socialism" (1911).

According to Harrison's materialist analysis, the origin of racism lay in class relations, specifically slavery, which required the view "that the slaves were not really human"; racism was sustained even after emancipation by ongoing economic competition and insecurity (53). Harrison held that "there is no justification of American race prejudice on scientific, social, or ethical grounds," but that it "is diligently fostered by those who have something to gain by it," namely those who seek to exploit others (57). Virulent racism also existed within the working-class movement, presenting theoretical problems of a different sort. In rebuttal to an anonymous Southern Socialist who excused white supremacy, Harrison wondered aloud what the

socialist philosophy would have amounted to “if Marx had been a Mississippian” (58). To Harrison, “the crucial test of Socialism’s sincerity” was its duty to champion the cause of African Americans, “the most ruthlessly exploited working class group in America” (73). He insisted, “We are not a white man’s party or a black man’s party but the party of the working class” (58).

Harrison also wrote on the broader labor movement. Bluntly exposing the hypocrisy of craft union officials who criticized black strikebreakers, Harrison wrote, “They want them out of the unions and also want them to fight for the unions. Presumably they would have them eating air-balls in the meantime” (66). Harrison pointed repeatedly to the exemplary inclusiveness of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in organizing 14,000 black timber workers and 18,000 white timber workers in “mixed” Louisiana locals in 1911. “This type of unionism,” he observed, “wants Negroes — not because its promoters love Negroes — but because they realize they cannot win if any of the working class is left out” (81). Harrison favored industrial unionism over craft unionism, and he was the sole black speaker at the celebrated 1913 Paterson silk strike. An appealing photograph in the reader shows him side by side with Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Big Bill Haywood.

While Harrison saw socialism as the way to interracial unity, he argued that the anti-capitalist movement must speak to the particular concerns of black people. He urged the Socialist Party to hire more black organizers and create special literature directed at “the psychology of the Negro,” as it did for Finns, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Poles, and Slovaks (61, 73). He cautioned against simplistic promises of an egalitarian future: “I do not expect that the advent of Socialism will at once remove race prejudice — unless it remove ignorance at the same time. But I do expect that it will remove racial injustice and lighten the black man’s burden. I do expect that it will take the white man from off the black man’s back and leave him free for the first time to make of himself as much or as little as he chooses” (59). In these dimensions, *A Hubert Harrison Reader* provides an important and clarifying supplement to the historical literature on the Socialist Party and race, a topic that deserves much further exploration.²

Increasingly disgruntled by the persistence of white supremacist elements in the Socialist Party and supportive of the party’s militant left wing, Harrison was suspended from the party in 1914. Exasperated, he quit. Even then, he founded a Radical Forum and lectured at the Ferrer Modern School in New York, but by 1915–16, his frustrations propelled him toward a “race first” perspective in the form of a “New Negro Manhood Movement.” He withdrew from speaking before primarily white audiences toward educational

2 Three helpful, though not exhaustive, treatments are Moore, 1969; Foner, 1977; and Miller, 2003.

activity within Harlem. “The New Negro,” he wrote in 1919, “is Negro first, Negro last, and Negro always. He needs not the white man’s sympathy; all he is asking for is equal justice before the law and equal opportunity in the battle of life. He needs and asks for no special privileges that are not granted to the other races; he is not a weakling” (98). Harrison’s pioneering discussion of “New Negro” pride included his editorship of a short-lived 1919 magazine, *New Negro*, well before Alain Locke’s famous 1925 collection of the same title. In 1917, Harrison created the Liberty League and its *Voice* to mount stronger challenges to white supremacy than the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was prepared to initiate. The League called for federal anti-lynching legislation at a time when the NAACP emphasized informal mechanisms of publicity and shame. The League supported labor and anti-colonialist causes, and it advocated armed self-defense against racist violence. “If white men are to kill unoffending Negroes,” Harrison wrote in 1917, “Negroes must kill white men in defense of their lives and property. This is the lesson of the East St. Louis massacre” (95).³

The move to “race first” may have been an understandable reaction against white supremacy within labor radicalism and American society, but it involved some tragic excesses. In 1917, for example, while still upholding the Wobbly ideal of multiracial class solidarity, Harrison called upon blacks to break strikes by exclusionary American Federation of Labor unions: “The American Negro may join hands with the American capitalist and scab them out of existence . . . in the name of a real organization of labor. . . . Since the A.F. of L. chooses to put Race before Class, let us return the compliment” (81). This imprudent and counterproductive course went hand in hand with a flirtation with indiscriminate retaliation against racist violence: “But suppose the common Negro in Tennessee decides to take a hand in the game? Suppose he lets it be known that for the life of every Negro soldier or civilian, two ‘crackers’ will die? Suppose he lets them know that it will be as costly to kill Negroes as it would be to kill real people? Then indeed the Ku-Klux would be met upon its own ground. And why not?” (267). Again: “We Negroes will never know, perhaps, how many whites were killed by our enraged brothers in East St. Louis. . . . But we will hope for the best” (95).

Perry maintains, however, that Harrison generally adopted an approach of “race consciousness” rather than the narrower approach implied by “race first.” According to Perry, “race consciousness suggested a broader and

3 Harrison’s call for armed self-defense not only anticipates Malcolm X in many places — his expression of the available means as “ballots, bullets or business” (123) is especially striking — but it corroborates recent works of history that have described armed self-defense as a longstanding tradition of black action and political thought rather than a sudden manifestation of Black Power in the 1960s. See, for example, Payne, 1995; Gaines, 1996; and Tyson, 1999.

deeper appeal that was more compatible with class consciousness, was not rigidly determinist, and was more temporal than ‘race first’” (85). This is not the case entirely, as evidenced by Harrison’s 1919 claim that “the roots of Race-consciousness must of necessity survive any and all changes in the economic order” because of “biology as a fact” (105). But it also is not a mere sleight of Perry’s hand, for Harrison did continue to consider himself a socialist, called for votes for Socialist Party candidates in 1917, supported industrial interracial unionism, saw imperialism and colonialism as the outgrowth of capitalism’s need to dispense of surplus products, and focused on the primacy of race consciousness out of “what is called in psychology a protective reaction” (116), that is, a requisite corrective to white supremacy.

“We say Race First,” he wrote in 1920, “because you have all along insisted on Race First and class after when you didn’t need our help” (109). Still, even when writing for Marcus Garvey’s *Negro World* in 1921, Harrison’s declaration that “the subject races and the subject classes are tied to each other” had a distinctly Marxist ring to it: “The international of the darker races must avail itself of whatever help it can get from those groups within the white race which are seeking to destroy the capitalist international of race prejudice and exploitation which is known as bourgeois ‘democracy’ at home and colonial imperialism abroad” (227).

In 1918, a Liberty Congress co-headed by Harrison and William Monroe Trotter protested the lack of American democracy, justice, suffrage, and civil rights during the First World War. Harrison bitterly criticized W. E. B. Du Bois in “The Descent of Dr. Du Bois” (1918) for Du Bois’ recommendation, “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances” (172). Harrison observed that the grievances in question were lynching, segregation, and disenfranchisement. To Harrison, it was an absurdity to call upon blacks “to help make the world ‘safe for democracy’ even while in sixteen States of the south in which nine-tenths of them reside, they have no voice in their own government” (209). Harrison concluded that Du Bois’ statement “ruins him as an influential person among Negroes at this time” (172).

Harrison began to call for black political organization akin to that in New York’s Irish wards, for a black political party, and for black presidential candidates. He grew more and more suspicious of well-meaning white liberals. “If friendship is to mean compulsory compromise foisted on us by kindly white people, or by cultured Negroes whose ideal is the imitation of the urbane acquiescence of these white friends, then we had better learn to look a gift horse in the mouth whenever we get the chance,” he wrote in 1917 (147). Mocking those who saw new movements and stirrings in the black and colonial worlds as a product of Bolshevik agitation, Harrison ascribed the new inclination toward self-determination as a result of the prosecution of the First World War on “democratic” grounds which

“black, brown, and yellow” peoples had decided to apply, for the first time, to themselves (103).

Harrison’s New Negro thought was formative for another West Indies immigrant, Marcus Garvey, who borrowed from Harrison’s ideology to attain unparalleled organizational success. Harrison, in turn, became in 1920 the principal editor of the *Negro World*, the Garveyite paper. Under the imprint of Harrison, the paper rocketed in circulation from 10,000 to 50,000 in less than a year, but tensions developed as Harrison grew increasingly critical of what he perceived as Garvey’s megalomania and financial irregularities. While Harrison thought Garvey’s program of black self-reliance, cultural pride, and independent institutions was worthy, he disdained Garvey’s schemes of African return. “The destiny of the American Negro lies in the future of America and no one need think that he will mortgage that future for the sake of a barbaric dream of African Empire with Dukes of Uganda and Ladies of the Nile,” he said in a 1923 lecture broadcast on radio (290). He wrote in his diary in 1920 of his deep regret for “Garvey’s prime defect, bombastic blabbing. He talks too much and too foolishly. . . . He lies to the people magniloquently. . . . The man has a perfect mania for flamboyant publicity” (189–191). By 1923, their break was complete.

Harrison did not place blame exclusively upon Garvey. He assigned real fault to “the race’s gullibility” (199). Harrison, a polymath, educator, and bibliophile, never romanticized African Americans, working instead through lectures and popular articles to enhance their knowledge and skills, which he often found inadequate. He called upon ordinary African Americans to “get the reading habit,” for “we can not win from the white man unless we know at least as much as the white man knows” (123). He urged them to consult dictionaries regularly and to “make it a point of pride to buy a Negro book — and read it” (366). He joined with Arthur Schomburg and others to develop the Department of Negro Literature and History at the 135th Street Public Library. “Let us . . . study engineering and physics, chemistry and commerce, agriculture and industry; let us learn more of nitrates, of copper, rubber and electricity; so we will know why Belgium, France, England and Germany want to be in Africa,” he advised (212). He noted candidly the “mutual envy, jealousy and hatred existing among Negroes and Negro groups in Harlem” (359), as shown in airs about relative pigmentation and tensions between West Indians and American-born black elites. In 1927, he lamented that instead of pursuing intellectual opportunity, “you can see [the young Harlem Negro] on any summer’s night out on the sidewalk gyrating and contorting himself like a pet monkey, doing the ‘Charleston’ or the ‘black bottom’ ” (360), echoes of which may still be heard in black intellectual ambivalence about hip-hop.

Cutting against the grain of the 1920s, Harrison denied that there was a “Harlem Renaissance.” Harrison’s position was that black writers had been producing powerful literature for decades, much of it superior to that of the 1920s. White patrons, Harrison thought, liked to fantasize that black literature began when they first encountered it; their enthusiasm for the primitive was a function of the deterioration of their own culture. Harrison’s review of Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926) was withering.

Harrison carried on his political activity after the disintegration of Garveyism, founding the International Colored Unity League and its paper, *The Voice of the Negro*, which in 1924 called for “a Negro state, not in Africa, as Marcus Garvey would have done, but in the United States” (8). This preceded the Communist International’s call for “self-determination for the Black Belt” by four years, but was something of a curiosity, given Harrison’s conjecture that Idaho, Wyoming, or Montana might be potential sites for such a state (397). Harrison spoke, educated, agitated, and wrote to the end.

Jeffrey Perry calls Harrison “the most class conscious of the race radicals, and the most race conscious of the class radicals. . . . more race conscious than Randolph and Owen and more class conscious than Garvey” (2). Perry speculates that Harrison’s writings were lost to common knowledge after his death in part because his radicalism was so extensive, extending to free thought and birth control as well as socialism and race consciousness, and opposing sterilization abuse and white paternalism, not only lynching and segregation. Perry also observes that Harrison’s crusty manner, acerbic style, and lack of calculation, though essential to his candor and boldness, led him to offer criticism that antagonized powerful leaders and institutions who had no reason to regret his passing, and that he left no institutional foundation for the perpetuation of his legacy. Nonetheless, thousands paid their respects at his Harlem funeral.

A lost memory is reclaimed in this breakthrough book. *A Hubert Harrison Reader* belongs on the shelf of every serious library and in the hands of every serious scholar of African American history and radical political thought. May it soon be followed by a full-scale biography.

CHRISTOPHER PHELPS

*Department of History
Ohio State University
1680 University Drive
Mansfield, Ohio 44906
phelps.51@osu.edu*

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