

Background and Comments on  
“The Letter to the Editor that *Science and Society* Refused to Publish”

by

Jeffrey B. Perry

February 5, 2012

On September 12, 2011, I received an email from David Laibman, the Editor of *Science and Society*, in response to a “Letter to the Editor” that I had submitted to that journal on August 5, 2011. My letter, submitted as “Correspondence,” followed the guidelines for such submission that are printed in the journal and on *Science and Society*’s webpage. My submission, “On Hubert Harrison,” was a response to a review of my book *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (Columbia University Press, 2008) published in the April 2011 (Vol. 75, No. 2) issue of *Science and Society*.

My “Correspondence” sought to set the historical record straight. It also put forth the position that readers of *Science and Society* “would have been better served” if the review “had more accuracy and less innuendo.” The letter addressed a number of specific issues and cited specific page references (the review cited no page references). My submission can be found at <http://www.jeffreybperry.net/blog.htm?post=837458> (top left).

In his letter to me Laibman wrote that he was in receipt of my Communication "On Hubert Harrison" and that it had been read by the Manuscript Collective of *Science and Society*. Laibman then stated: “The problem is that \*Science & Society\* (like, I think, most journals) has a firm policy against allowing book authors to respond to book reviews.” He further stated that he had “also learned after many years in this business that there are exceptions to every rule in publishing, this one included,” but in “the present case,” *Science and Society*’s manuscript readers feel “that no exception should be made.”

The problems I have with Laibman’s “firm policy” statement are the following:

1. If the “firm policy” was so firm a policy one would think it would be listed in *Science and Society*, or on the journal’s website, as are other policies. It is not.

2. If the “firm policy” was so firm a policy one would think it would be well known by the journal’s “Editorial Administrator.” In fact, it was the Editorial Administrator of *Science and Society* who, in the *Science and Society* office, showed me a pre-publication version of the review, printed out a copy and gave it to me, and suggested that I should submit any corrections I cared to make in a letter for the “Correspondence” section of the journal.

3. My own recent experiences with other journals make clear that Laibman’s “firm policy” is not as widespread as he suggests. Specifically, in the period since *Science and Society*’s refusal to publish my letter, I have had two pieces published in journals that offer concrete evidence that other journals do publish letters from authors in response to reviews of their books. In both cases journals have indicated that serious efforts by an author to set the historical record straight, take precedence over any policy of not allowing an author to respond to a review.

In one case the journal *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* edited by Leon Fink printed my letter (Volume 8, No. 4, Winter 2011, pp. 175-77) in response to a review of *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* by Brian Kelly. In the second case, my article “The Developing Conjuncture and Some Insights from Hubert Harrison and Theodore W. Allen on the Centrality of the Fight against White Supremacy,” (published in *Cultural Logic* on January 1, 2012 at <http://clogic.eserver.org/2010/2010.html>), quotes from Theodore W. Allen’s letter to the editor of the *Journal of Southern History* (Vol. 66, No. 1, February 2000, pp. 196-2000) that was published in response to a J. Douglas Deal’s review of Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race* in that journal.

4. I believe that any “firm policy” against publishing an author’s response, especially if that author’s response seeks to correct inaccuracies in a review, works against *Science and Society*’s stated interest in being part of a “serious community both rooted in and developing a systematic alternative vision and method” in the Marxist traditions. [I note in contrast that I received very

different treatment from another Marxist publication, the online SocialistWorker.org, which published a letter by me that aimed to set the historical record straight in response to a piece by one of their editors that discussed Hubert Harrison. See -- <http://socialistworker.org/2010/11/30/response-on-race-and-racism> ]

## Further Background and Comments

In early 2011 I was shown into the office of *Science and Society* by that journal's Editorial Administrator, who was also a member of a class I taught at the Brecht Forum in New York on "Hubert Harrison, Theodore W. Allen, and the Continuing Centrality of the Struggle Against White Supremacy." (The *Science and Society* office is on the same floor of the same building as the Brecht Forum.) The Editorial Administrator proceeded to show me on screen, and then to print a copy for me of, a submitted review about my book *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (Columbia University Press, 2008), which is the first volume of my two-volume Harrison biography. When I read the review I found inaccuracies, innuendos, and a failure to even attempt to substantiate any statements with page references. I mentioned this to the Editorial Administrator who suggested that a response in the form of a letter to the editor, published as "Correspondence," would be appropriate, could generate important discussion, and should be submitted.

It was the Editorial Administrator who suggested to me that I write the letter to the editor and submit it as "Correspondence." It was also the Editorial Administrator who told me that the reviewer of my book had a parent on the Manuscript Collective of *Science and Society* and I should know that. It was the Editorial Administrator who subsequently advised me that I should keep my submission under the 3,000-word limit so that its length would not be used as a basis for non-publication.

After being so informed by the Editorial Administrator, I then read on the *Science and Society* webpage that, "Unlike the practice of many journals, assigned book reviews are evaluated by the Manuscript Collective prior to publication."

In the course of the overall editorial process (in the period between when I received the initially submitted review from the Editorial Administrator and the final publication of the

review) several statements were elided from the reviewer's original submission. Among the statements that were removed and did not appear in the published review are the following:

“ . . . this volume is a well-thought out, meticulously researched narrative of Hubert Harrison's life.”

“This volume is an indispensable addition to our understanding of Black radical history and Marxist praxis in the early twentieth century.”

“Perry makes an important contribution to academic writings produced over the past few decades initiated with the magnum opus by Winston James that discuss the significance of the Caribbean for Black radicalism in the U.S.”

I found what was elided from the review during *Science and Society's* editorial process to be of interest.

Finally, I think that David Laibman, in his letter to me put forth a strawman argument not consistent with being part of a “serious community both rooted in and developing a systematic alternative vision and method” when he wrote “Authors will understandably wish to ‘answer’ every criticism; the resulting cacophony of argument would quickly drown out the review process as such, and would discourage reviewers from writing candid reviews.” I do not think what Laibman describes has to be the case, nor do I think that it was the case in this instance.

Most importantly, I think that encouraging more well-thought-out and documented exchange of ideas would lead to higher quality reviews and would help push our collective understanding to a higher level.