

To: David Laibman, Editor of *Science and Society*
From: Jeffrey B. Perry, jeffreybperry@gmail.com, www.jeffreybperry.net
Correspondence Submission
Re: Review of *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (in April 2011 issue)
August 5, 2011

“In the first place, remember that in a book review you are writing for a public who want to know whether it is worth their while to read the book about which you are writing. They are primarily interested more in what the author set himself to do and how he does it than in your own private loves and hates.”

Hubert Harrison, 1922

St. Croix-born, Harlem-based Hubert Harrison (1883-1927) was described by the historian Joel A. Rogers in *World's Great Men of Color* as “the foremost Afro-American intellect of his time.” A. Philip Randolph referred to him as the “Father of Harlem Radicalism.” (Perry, 2008, 1, 5)

Harrison merited such praise. He was a radical political activist who served as the foremost Black organizer, agitator, and theoretician in the Socialist Party of New York during its 1912 heyday; as the founder and leading figure of the militant, World War I-era “New Negro” movement; and as the editor of the *Negro World* and principal radical influence on the Garvey movement during its radical high point in 1920. He was also a class conscious and race conscious “radical internationalist” whose views profoundly influenced a generation of “New Negro” militants that included the class-radical socialists Randolph and Chandler Owen, the future communists Cyril V. Briggs, Richard B. Moore, and Williana Burroughs, and the race radical Marcus Garvey. Considered more race conscious than Randolph and Owen and more class conscious than Garvey, Harrison is a seminal figure in 20th century Black radicalism. (Perry, 2008, 2, 4, 94, and 437-38 n. 45)

He was not only a political radical, however. Harrison was also an immensely popular orator and freelance educator; a highly praised journalist, editor, and book reviewer; a promoter of Black writers and artists; a pioneer Black activist in the freethought and birth control movements; and a

bibliophile and library popularizer (who helped develop the 135th Street Public Library into an international center for research in Black culture). In his later years he was the leading Black lecturer for the New York City Board of Education. (Perry, 2008, 5-6)

One area where Harrison, has much to offer, concerns book reviewing. At age twenty-four he authored two front-page *New York Times Saturday Review of Books* pieces on literary criticism; he initiated what was described as the “first regular book review section known to Negro newspaperdom”; he authored some 70 reviews and regularly reviewed books in the newspapers that he edited including *The Voice* (1917-1918), *New Negro* (1919), and *Negro World* (1920); he was praised for his insights as a critic by Nobel Prize winner Eugene O’Neill; and he has recently been described as a “patron saint” of book reviewers by Scott McLemee in the online *Columbia Journalism Review*. It was in the *Negro World* that Harrison offered the sound advice on book reviewing quoted in the epigraph above. (Perry, 2001, 2, 295-6)

I think *Science and Society* readers would have been better served if Margaret Stevens, in her April 2011 review of *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918*, had followed Harrison’s advice more closely and if she had put more accuracy and less innuendo (Harrison’s “predilection,” “it is curious,” “it is curious that Perry, repeatedly,” etc.) in her review. Readers would have been better informed about both Harrison and the biography and they would be better able to decide, in Harrison’s words, “whether it is worth their while to read the book.”

Here are some failings of the review –

1. Stevens writes that “Perry . . . emphasizes Harrison’s role in founding the Liberty League in Harlem He does not, however, examine Harrison’s continuing ties with ‘old crowd’ Black leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.”

Regarding Washington, Stevens’ statement makes absolutely no sense. Harrison was an outspoken critic of Washington for years, described him as a “subservient,” and characterized his political philosophy as “one of submission and acquiescence in political servitude.” Harrison was summarily fired from the Post Office through the efforts of Washington’s “Tuskegee Machine” (in 1911) after writing two letters to the *New York Sun* critical of Washington. Stevens’ statement also makes no sense since Washington *died in 1915* – over a year-and-a-half before the founding of Harrison’s Liberty League in June 1917! (Perry, 2008, 123, 132-3, 261, 285, 389)

Regarding Du Bois, in *Hubert Harrison* I describe how Harrison started out as a supporter of Du Bois and how political differences emerged in the period covered by the first volume.

Harrison differed from Du Bois on “The Talented Tenth,” which Du Bois described as the “educated and gifted” group whose members “must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people.” Harrison thought that the “Talented Tenth” hadn’t provided the leadership that was needed, that they should come down from their Mt. Sinais and get among the people, and that the “Colored” leadership implicit in that concept was not “pre-ordained” to lead Black people. (Perry, 2008, 125, 238)

During 1911-12 Harrison, drawing from the work of autonomous women’s clubs and Foreign Language Federations in the SP, initiated a Colored Socialist Club in a special effort to attract “Negroes” to the party. Du Bois, while still an SP member, did not support that effort. (Perry, 2008, 148, 169-71)

In the 1912 election Harrison supported and campaigned vigorously for the SP Presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, while Du Bois left the SP in order to support Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic Party candidate. (Perry, 2008, 19, 269, 281)

In 1916 Harrison articulated a plan for developing bottom-up race unity that would eventually lead to the founding of the Liberty League. The plan was consciously in opposition to the approaches of both Washington and Du Bois whom Harrison felt started at the wrong end – i.e. they began at the top when they should have begun at the bottom. Interestingly, in his third autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), Du Bois would reach a similar conclusion. (Perry, 2008, 271)

In 1917-1918 with the Liberty League and then with the Liberty Congress Harrison advocated federal anti-lynching legislation, which the NAACP declined to push at this time and did not publicly support until later. In 1917, according to historian Robert L. Zangrando in *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950*, the NAACP “actually declined to make an open push for” federal anti-lynching legislation.” Zangrando concluded that NAACP’s failure to wholeheartedly support the anti-lynching legislation reflected the fact that it “was reaching for southern support and still pulling its punches on the matter of federal statute.” (Perry, 2008, 9, 288-9, 298-9, 310, 375, 381, 515 n 29)

The Harrison/William Monroe Trotter-led Liberty Congress of 1918 was a major Black national protest effort during World War I. It opposed lynching, segregation, and disfranchisement and petitioned Congress for federal anti-lynching legislation. Joel E. Spingarn, the head of the

NAACP, attempted to have it called off. Spingarn was a major in Military Intelligence (that branch of the War Department that monitored the Black and radical communities) and he was a pro-war socialist at a time when Lenin and others in the international socialist movement were criticizing that position. When Spingarn's attempt to get the Liberty Congress called-off didn't work, he spoke with Du Bois and they agreed to host a "Colored Editors Conference" to meet a week earlier in a blatant effort to steal the thunder from, and undermine, the Liberty Congress. In this period Du Bois put in an application for a captaincy in Military Intelligence and, as part of the quid-pro-quo related to his captaincy application, he wrote his infamous July 1918 *Crisis* editorial entitled "Close Ranks." In that editorial Du Bois urged African Americans to "forget our special grievances [lynching, segregation, disfranchisement] and close ranks" behind Wilson's war effort. (Perry, 2008, 232, 373-6, 381, 385-6, 473-4 n 36)

In response to Du Bois's "Close Ranks" editorial and his application for the captaincy in Military Intelligence, Harrison wrote a scathing editorial in *The Voice* entitled "The Descent of Dr. Du Bois." Harrison's exposé was a principal reason that Du Bois was denied the captaincy and, more than any other document, it marked the significant break between the "New Negroes" and the older leadership. (Perry, 2008, 386-91, 408 n. 34; Aptheker, 1983, 159)

Because of such criticism, Du Bois never mentioned Harrison in *The Crisis* and seemingly went out of his way to avoid doing so. (Perry, 2008, 352-3, 386-91, 408 n 34.)

2. Stevens questions my "placing Harrison rather than Garvey at the helm of Harlem's burgeoning Black radical community" and not "more clearly" elucidating some related "larger theoretical and historical" issues (which she does not name or define).

The record left by contemporaries is clear about Harrison's importance as a radical and his signal influence on Garvey's radicalism. Through mid-1918 (when volume one ends) Harrison was clearly the dominant figure in Harlem radicalism. For anyone to even suggest that Garvey, not Harrison was the dominant radical figure at that time, is, based on the record, utter nonsense. My biography sought to document what actually happened and I think this is a proper task for both a biographer and an historian.

The Jamaica-born Garvey came to the United States in 1916 in order to raise funds to set up an industrial school in Jamaica along the lines of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, which he admired. At first, he did not fare very well in the U.S. and he had, in his own words, "made up

his mind to return to Jamaica in the spring of 1917, when he became associated with [his old boyhood friend] Mr. W. A. Domingo and Mr. Hubert Harrison.” Domingo, a socialist and the first editor of Garvey’s *Negro World*, explained that Harrison “was a brilliant man, a great intellectual, a Socialist and highly respected” and “Garvey like the rest of us [A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, Cyril Briggs, Grace Campbell, Richard B. Moore, and other “New Negro” militants] followed Hubert Harrison.” (Perry, 2008, 2, 294)

Anselmo Jackson, a writer for both Harrison’s *Voice* and Garvey’s *Negro World*, further explains that beginning in 1916:

outdoors and indoors, Hubert Harrison was preaching an advanced type of radicalism with a view to impressing race consciousness and effecting racial solidarity among Negroes. . . . [The] atmosphere was charged with Harrison’s propaganda; men and women of color thruout the United States and the West Indies . . . pledged their support to Harrison as they became members of the Liberty League. Garvey publicly eulogized Harrison, joined the Liberty League and took a keen interest in its affairs. . . . [Harrison] was the forerunner of Garvey and contributed largely to the success of the latter . . . (Perry, 2008, 338)

As regards “larger theoretical and historical” issues – they appear throughout the biography: I will mention a few.

From 1911 to 1914 Harrison was America’s leading Black Socialist and he made major theoretical contributions on the subject of “The Negro and Socialism” by advocating that socialists champion the cause of African Americans as a revolutionary doctrine; that they develop a special appeal to and for African Americans; and that they affirm the duty of all socialists to oppose race prejudice. These three themes would contribute significantly to left activism in the U.S. in the twentieth century. (Perry, 2008, 7)

When he left the SP Harrison offered what is arguably the most profound, but least heeded criticism, in U.S. left history. He stated simply that the Socialist Party [like the labor movement] has “insisted on [white] Race First and class after.” That the “white men” of the Party put “[the white] ‘race first’ rather than ‘class first.’” As I explain, “Harrison was suggesting that a primary reason for limited working-class consciousness and for the absence of socialism in the United States was white supremacy.” (Perry, 2008, 87-8; Perry, 2001, 109, 115)

I also make clear that Harrison’s “experiences with white supremacy within the socialist and labor movements” was an important factor leading to his founding of “the ‘New Negro Movement’ . . . which laid the basis for the Garvey movement and contributed so significantly . . . to the social

and literary climate leading to the 1925 publication of Alain Locke's well-known *The New Negro*." I emphasize that "Harrison's mass-based political movement was, however, qualitatively different from the more middle-class, arts-based, apolitical movement associated with Locke." (Perry, 2008, 7, 8)

3. Stevens writes "it is curious that Perry repeatedly refers to Harrison as African American rather than Caribbean American or even Afro-Caribbean."

In the biography I refer to Harrison as "Negro," "Negro American," "Black," "Black Caribbean," "a key figure in developing Caribbean radicalism"; a "poor, working-class, Black Caribbean immigrant," "poor, Black, foreign born, and from the Caribbean," "African American," and so on and I refer to his parents as "Afro-Caribbean." In response to Stevens' assertion that my biography "repeatedly refers to Harrison as African American" – she is simply wrong. In the entire book I count two times that I refer to Harrison as an "African American" – hardly the "repeatedly" that Stevens tells readers. (Perry, 2008, 3, 5, 23, 16-7, 159)

I have no problem referring to Harrison as an African American, however, particularly since that is one name that has come to replace "Negro American"; since Harrison referred to himself with pride as an "untamed, untamable African" and a "Negro American"; since he named his organization the "Liberty League of Negro Americans"; since he wrote "I was born Danish and am now twice an American; first by my own free choice and next by Uncle Sam's purchase of the Danish islands"; and since he wrote:

I became an American because I was eager to be counted in the fight wherever I happened to be, to bear the burden and heat of the day in helping to make conditions better in this great land for the children who will come after me. And although I am not SATISFIED with American conditions as they now are, I realize that in these days of change and unrest I would not have been satisfied anywhere else. In China I would be fighting against foreign domination, in Egypt, India, South Africa or West Africa I would be fighting against the British oligarchs, in Jamaica against the sinister repression of black people practiced by both whites and mulattoes, and in the Dutch, French or American West Indies against crackerism, stupidity or cowardice. (Perry, 2001, 92, 254, 256, 282, 302)

4. Stevens writes (p. 284) that Harrison had a "predilection for electoral struggles."

To the contrary, Harrison is a prime example of a radical activist who would struggle, as the saying goes, “by any means necessary.” During his life he was a militant proponent of direct action, sabotage, armed self-defense, strikes, boycotts, migration, and direct challenges to the KKK. In volume two I will cite Military Intelligence that he frequently advocated Bolshevism. (Perry, 2008, 7, 11, 197-8, 201, 291, 298-9, 311.)

He functioned both inside and outside the electoral arena and arguably his most important contribution to revolutionary strategy in the U.S. was related to that fact.

While in the Socialist Party during a period when the key political debates concerned positions on revolutionary vs. evolutionary socialism and revolutionary unionism vs. AFL craft unionism, Harrison, in 1911 and 1912, appealed to both wings of the Party and proposed a new litmus test, a new “crucial test,” for U.S. Socialists—“to champion” the cause of the “Negro.” He thought this was the key to revolutionary strategy in the United States. (Perry, 2008, 180)

5. Stevens writes: “Perry’s emphasis on Harrison’s primacy among the leading ‘race men’ in Harlem’s Black radical scene in 1917 occludes the role of women in the Black radical tradition.”

Stevens creates a “straw man.” The phrase that Stevens puts in quotes -- “race men” -- never appears once in *Hubert Harrison*. Stevens doesn’t mention one woman on the Harlem scene in this period that was “occluded.” This volume, covering the period up to 1918, contains information on many women active in Harlem and highlights, in particular, the contributions of Williana Jones Burroughs and Frances Reynolds Keyser. It also offers interesting new information on Eslanda Cardoza Goode.

6. Stevens finds it “curious” that I don’t compare Harrison’s marriage to several others (including two second marriages) that all occur outside the time frame of this volume and include Du Bois’s 1951 marriage to Shirley Graham.

The book is a biography of Hubert Harrison’s life up to 1918. It is not a work focusing on comparative marriages, particularly not on one 24 years after Harrison’s death.

Hubert Harrison was popular and extremely influential in his day. Fully aware of that popularity and influence Arthur A. Schomburg, the outstanding book collector of the African Diaspora, presciently pointed to Harrison’s importance for future generations when he eulogized at

his funeral that Harrison was “ahead of his time.” Schomburg was correct. Harrison’s life story and insights have much to offer readers today, particularly in this period of intensifying class and race oppression. (Perry, 2008, vii, 395)

I think that *Science and Society* should have offered a more accurate and less innuendo-laden review that better informed readers about the biography of Hubert Harrison, the most important Black Socialist in early twentieth-century America. Because this was not done, I hope you will share my response – keeping in mind the inspiring words from the front page of Hubert’s Harrison’s *Voice* –

“For the future in the distance
And the good that we can do.”

In solidarity,

Jeffrey B. Perry

References

Perry, Jeffrey B., ed. 2001. *A Hubert Harrison Reader* (Middletown, Ct: Wesleyan University Press)

Perry, Jeffrey B. 2008. *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (New York: Columbia University Press)