

Hubert Harrison's wisdom on race, war, and equality

By [Jeffrey B. Perry](#)

April 26, 2016

In 1911, Afro-Caribbean intellectual activist [Hubert Harrison](#) wrote in the [New York Call](#) that “politically the Negro is the touchstone of the modern democratic idea.”

This touchstone metaphor is both startling and profound. Applying it to current issues (employment, education, poverty, incarceration, interactions with police) demonstrates how far from true democracy and equality this country is. But it also strengthens those who seek a more just and equal society, affirming the importance of current struggles against mass incarceration and of the growing demand that [#BlackLivesMatter](#).

In the same passage Harrison argues that true democracy and equality for “Negroes” implies “a revolution . . . startling even to think of.” That prescient analysis foreshadowed the civil rights struggle, which catalyzed the anti-war, labor, student, women's, and other movements for social change. The civil rights struggle had such impact because its cause was just—and it hit directly at the white supremacy used to maintain ruling-class social control in the United States.

In 1916 President Woodrow Wilson ran for reelection under the slogan, “He kept us out of war.” In 1917 he led the United States into World War I in order to “make the world safe for democracy.”

“I was well aware that Woodrow Wilson's protestations of democracy were lying protestations,” wrote Harrison, “consciously and deliberately designed to deceive.” Pointing to the evils of lynching, segregation, and disfranchisement, Harrison responded with a call to “make the South safe for democracy.” He later explained, “During the war the idea of democracy was widely advertised, especially in the English-speaking world; mainly as a convenient camouflage behind which competing imperialists masked their sordid aims.” He emphasized “that those who so loudly proclaimed and formulated the new democratic demands never had the slightest intention of extending the limits or the applications of ‘democracy.’”

Harrison's is a significant voice. Yet many people today are not familiar with this brilliant, working-class autodidact. Born in 1883 in St. Croix, he was later based in Harlem. He worked as a writer, orator, educator, and activist. Historian Joel A. Rogers [describes](#) him as "perhaps the foremost Afro-American intellect of his time." Labor and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph considered him "the father of Harlem radicalism."

Harrison was the leading black activist in the [Socialist Party of New York](#) during its 1912 heyday and the only black speaker at the historic Paterson silk workers strike of 1913. He was reportedly an unrivaled soapbox orator who offered as many as 23 talks in a single week. One *New York Times* article from 1912 describes how he spoke on socialism at Broad and Wall Streets—in front of the New York Stock Exchange—for over three hours, to an audience extending as far as his voice could reach (in a clear precursor to Occupy Wall Street a century later).

After leaving socialism in 1917, Harrison founded the first organization (the Liberty League) and first newspaper (*The Voice*) of the militant "New Negro Movement," and he wrote [The Negro and the Nation](#). He also led a large Harlem rally protesting white supremacist attacks on the African American community of East St. Louis, Illinois, just 12 miles from Ferguson.

In 1919 Harrison edited *The New Negro: A Monthly Magazine of a Different Sort* ("intended as an organ of the international consciousness of the darker races—especially of the Negro race"). Then, in 1920, he served as editor of the *Negro World* and was a principal radical influence on the [Marcus Garvey movement](#). Toward the end of that year he published his second book, *When Africa Awakes: The "Inside Story" of the Stirrings and Strivings of the New Negro in the Western World*.

Harrison was a self-described "radical internationalist" whose views on race and class profoundly influenced a generation of "New Negro" militants, including the class-radical Randolph and the race-radical Garvey. Considered more race-conscious than Randolph and more class-conscious than Garvey, Harrison is recognized as a key link between the two major trends of the [Black Liberation Movement](#)—the labor/civil rights trend associated with Randolph and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the race/nationalist trend associated with Garvey and Malcolm X.

When Harrison died unexpectedly at age 44 from an appendicitis-related condition, the Harlem community responded with a massive outpouring. Arthur Schomburg,

fully aware of Harrison's popularity, eulogized that he was "ahead of his time."

He was. Those who look into Harrison's life and [writings](#) will find that his insights on "the touchstone," democracy, equality, and war are only the beginning of what he has to offer us today.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#) and [Beth Shalom Hessel](#).*