Harlem Renaissance Scholars Debate the Route to Racial Progress
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Harlem Renaissance Scholars Debate the Route to Racial Progress

While the intellectual contributions of the luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance cannot be denied, many black academic scholars of the period had far different social and political views on the best course to follow to achieve the betterment of the black race.

by Jonathan Scott Holloway

In 1925 THE eminent philosopher and social critic Alain Locke edited The New Negro, an anthology of essays, poems, and short stories that provided a snapshot of the black cultural production then emanating from Harlem. Many scholars agree that Locke's collection represents the start of the Harlem, or New Negro, Renaissance. Thus Alain Locke's contribution to American arts and letters is beyond debate. Can the same be said for the movement he helped nurture and name? Today, when we study black history in the 1920s, we invariably and almost exclusively focus on the Harlem Renaissance. But something valuable might be gained by examining the work or opinions of those black scholars who conducted their work outside of cultural parameters established by the Renaissance artists and intellectuals. Before conducting such a study, however, it remains important to understand just what Locke and his compatriots advocated.

In The New Negro, Locke set out to describe the change in attitude amongst blacks that many had observed since the end of the First World War. Even prior to the armistice, a new generation of black intellectuals, artists, and politicians had begun to emerge declaring that the “Old Negro must go!” Now that the war had ended and blacks had served their country well, black Americans believed they had proven their worthiness and deserved their place at the table. They no longer had to wait passively for white benefaction to fear their own “blackness.” Compared to their predecessors, the New Negroes were politically aggressive, culturally articulate, and urbane.

Most scholarship relating to this era has focused on its literary and artistic production. Figures such as Wallace Thurman, William H. Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Hale Woodruff, Nella Larsen, Countee Cullen, Aaron Douglass, and Jean Toomer publicized the Harlem scene and created critically acclaimed work. These talents explored black heritage, cultivated authentic black art forms, and analyzed folk culture. Instead of shunning their roots, these artists sought to identify and celebrate them. But this movement was not merely about art for art's sake. Alain Locke certainly spoke for many of the Harlem artists when he wrote that the art of the Renaissance was an attempt to get at the “tap root of vigorous, flourishing living.”* In Locke’s opinion, developing an independent and vibrant artistic spirit was important to the improvement of the race. Once a group spirit or healthy culture had been developed, black Americans would find it much easier to have their demands met.

In his zeal to capture the younger generation’s declaration of cultural independence, Locke largely ignored much of the political activity that also defined this era. While the late scholar Nathan Huggins argued that black politics and protest were funneled through the art of the Renaissance, one cannot ignore that for all the cultural achievements of that movement, this was also an era of avant-garde political and social activism. To that end, progressive black intellectuals were welcome in the homes of leading white American artists and cultural philanthropists as well as those belonging to social critics and agitators.

One of the more prominent white political upstarts, magazine editor V.F. Calverton, took a keen interest in the Harlem Renaissance and the way it was being interpreted and promoted by Locke and other leading black scholars. Calverton knew about Locke’s plans to edit The New Negro and eagerly awaited its publication. However, even before Locke’s work came out, Calverton became disappointed with the list of contributors Locke assembled to participate

in the project. Abram Harris Jr., one of the young black rising academic stars not invited to participate in The New Negro project, had befriended Calverton some years earlier and shared his disappointment with the project. During 1925 and 1926, these two scholar activists exchanged a series of letters regarding Locke, The New Negro project, and the Harlem Renaissance. These letters reveal what Locke’s anthology tends to dismiss or wash over — that a range of political options were available to black activists and intellectuals of the 1920s and that many of these options were considered and occasionally taken.

Those who considered themselves New Negroes believed that they had much to offer society, and Harris was no different in this regard. A celebrated economist who would eventually produce such seminal works as The Black Worker (coauthored with Sterling Spero) and The Negro as Capitalist, Harris was known during the Renaissance for his call to unify white and black laborers, his unrelenting critiques of capitalism, and his public condemnation of anyone who “preached race consciousness.” Harris insisted on using modern social scientific (objective) methods to further his analyses. It is with this last issue in mind — the objective ideal — that Calverton and Harris agreed Locke had failed. Instead of offering concrete solutions to blacks’ social conditions, Calverton and Harris felt that Locke offered only race-conscious romanticism.

Although Calverton was furious about Locke’s decision to exclude Harris and took it upon himself to contact Locke and complain about the oversight, Harris assured Calverton he was not upset about the exclusion. Instead Harris claimed his principal disappointment about The New Negro was that it lacked any objective balance. He thought most of the contributors “sentimental” and that such a mind-set flew in the face of what the younger black intellectuals were trying to accomplish. “I am just sorry from a critical viewpoint,” Harris wrote, “that [Locke] did not include . . . ‘economic tendencies’ in the ‘New Negro.’ Any objective treatment of the phenomena related to the new intellectual geist among the young black intelligentsia ought to give adequate economic background of the present conflict between universalism and racialism in the Negro group.”

A great fan of Harris’ radical scholarship, Calverton was unmoved by Harris’ professed lack of concern about the exclusion and continued to badger Locke over the matter. Harris was not pleased by Calverton’s passionate support and asked him to stop. But Calverton persisted and then made matters worse when he began to compare Harris to the most influential black intellectuals of the day: W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Kelly Miller, and Locke. Calverton’s enthusiasm struck a nerve. Harris’ pleas now
The Black Plague

“An untoward circumstance has been injected into the private dwelling market in the vicinity of 133rd and 134th streets. During the last three years the flats in 134th Street between Lenox and Seventh avenues, that were occupied entirely by white folks have been captured for occupancy by a Negro population. Lenox and Seventh avenues have practically succumbed to the ingress of colored tenants. Nearly all the old dwellings in 134th Street to midway in the block west from Seventh Avenue are occupied by colored tenants, and real estate brokers predict that it is only a matter of time when the entire block will be a stronghold of the Negro population. As a result of the extension of this African colony, dwellings have depreciated from 15 to 20 percent in value. The cause of the colored influx is inexplicable.”

— New York Herald
December 24, 1905

turned angry. In Harris’ anger we witness the articulation of a strain of independent black criticism that is often absent from discussions of the Harlem Renaissance:

In view of the fact that I pay a lip-service, which I despise to my heart, to W.E.B. Du Bois and the rest of his sentimental ilk, I suppose the damn habit of thinking them really great is slowly crystallizing. So you can at once understand my emotional reaction to your criticism of friend W.E.B. and the rest. Intellectually, I feel that with time and study, I could clean the whole bunch if we were simultaneously employed with a job that demands clear-cut objective and philosophic thinking. They have me on these lyrical rhapsodies of racially inflected ebullience.*

In earlier letters to Calverton, Harris had expressed his disdain for sycophants and race romantics, so one can easily imagine the bile that rose in Harris’ throat as he kowtowed to the older race leaders. Indeed, Harris’ exasperation may lead one to find in his words a bitter proclamation of self-hate — a proclamation of everything that the Harlem Renaissance was not. It would be a mistake, however, to draw such a conclusion. Instead, one ought to view Harris’ words as an expression of intense frustration. After all, Harris never hated being black — he simply was angry that others considered his blackness to be his distinguishing characteristic. If nothing else, Harris and many other black intellectuals of his generation thought their work — or any respectable work, for that matter — ought to go beyond the boundaries of race (in terms of subject matter and audience).


Considering the fact that Calverton shared this opinion, it alarmed Harris when in another 1925 letter Calverton criticized him for not trying to lead “his people.” Harris fumed, “I have no desire to do it. . . . Damn my people, if I must confess to having a people.” Sentiments such as Calverton’s only signaled the extent to which Harris — and by implication other black intellectuals — was correled by expectations of racial cohesion. After all, Harris remained convinced that one’s race did not supersede other potential commonalities. White and black workers, Harris reasoned, could accomplish much if they focused on their common cause as aggrieved laborers and stepped back from the racial divide between them. Where Locke believed the race’s salvation lay in its cultural development, Harris thought blacks would develop only by abandoning racial reasoning and developing strong political coalitions.

The casual student of black history or the Harlem Renaissance may find the tone and nature of Harris’ dissent merely “interesting.” After all, black scholars have always held different opinions about how to lift the race. However, there is something more broadly significant about Harris’ belief that the solution to the Negro problem could be gained via objective social scientific reasoning and pragmatic politics. Harris came of age during an era seemingly ripe with possibility for change. Thus Harris felt that if he acted on his beliefs concerning science and romantic racialism he could have a profound impact on the nature and methodology of black higher education.

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Harris was not the only scholar of his age who held an abiding faith in the power of social science. He was part of the first generation of black intellectuals to receive doctorates (other black academics, like Du Bois and Locke, held Ph.D.s but they were the exception and not the rule). These freshly minted Ph.D.s brought to the institutions where they taught a level of academic rigor that had been absent. They urged their students to ask hard questions of the intellectual and political establishments and to not be content with the teachings of “pseudosociologists” like Howard Dean Kelly Miller.
Reacting in part to this new call to arms by professors such as Harris, students at some HBCUs such as Howard (where Harris and a number of his more vocal and sympathetic colleagues taught) became known during the 1930s for their nonstop protests and undying willingness to challenge the status quo. The 1930s bore witness to student rallies embracing international and domestic concerns. Howard students, for example, mounted protests against war, fascism, and lynching. They also sought freedom for the Scottsboro Boys and a just application of federal policies as laid out in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

The hard-nosed academic and political approach embraced by these new social scientists was a direct response to what they perceived to be the overly race-conscious tone of 1920s black scholarship and arts. But while many of their students embraced the new tactics, these young black intellectuals often enraged white political and financial leaders. This was a risky course of action as black educational institutions were still largely beholden to white philanthropic interests. Several members of Howard University's board of trustees, for example, were either high-ranking representatives or the heads of such major philanthropies as the Julius Rosenwald Fund or the Phelps-Stokes Fund.

Black Scholars Hamstrung by White Benefactors

This fact leads to one of the strange ironies concerning the new era of tough, race-neutral social science that emerged as the Harlem Renaissance faded into the 1930s. Whereas many of the central figures of the Renaissance relied on white patronage to support their black artistic and cultural endeavors, black professors of the 1930s who fought against racial reasoning often found themselves hamstrung by white benefactors. As a result, many black scholars felt as if they had to be careful not to extend their academic inquiries too far lest they upset the status quo of the pace of black advancement as envisioned by the white philanthropic world. Indeed, on more than one occasion, Harris was scolded by other, more prominent black scholars for failing to be sufficiently diplomatic where white financial interests were involved.

Just as we are able to identify the Harlem Renaissance and the black pride and cultural chest pounding that are associated with it, we need to take note of the serious academic debates of that era that concerned the quest for objectivity and the social benefits one could derive from objective reasoning and pragmatic activism. This is not a call to diminish the importance of the Renaissance. Rather, it is to help fulfill more accurately one of the tenets of the Harlem Renaissance — that a new age had arrived for black Americans and that the young black artistic and literary intelligentsia had new solutions for old problems. That these young talents advocated different approaches does not diminish the significance of their actions. Instead, it points to the diverse human experiences and thought processes that coalesce around what we understand to be the black experience in the United States.

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