

= Abram Lincoln Harris =

Abram Lincoln Harris , Jr . (January 17 , 1899 ? November 6 , 1963) was an American economist , academic , anthropologist and a social critic of blacks in the United States . Considered by many as the first African American to achieve prominence in the field of economics , Harris was also known for his heavy influence on black radical and neo @-@ conservative thought in the United States . As an economist , Harris is most famous for his 1931 collaboration with political scientist Sterling Spero to produce a study on African American labor history titled *The Black Worker* and his 1936 work *The Negro as Capitalist* , in which he criticized black businessmen for not promoting interracial trade . He headed the economics department at Howard University from 1936 to 1945 and taught at the University of Chicago from then until his death . As a social critic , Harris took an active radical stance on racial relations by examining historical black involvement in the workplace , and suggested that African Americans needed to take more action in race relations .

= = Early life = =

Harris was born into a middle @-@ class African American family on January 17 , 1899 in Richmond , Virginia . His father was a butcher at a meat shop , and his mother was a schoolteacher . The family that ran the Richmond meat shop where Harris ' father worked was German American . As a result of his frequent contact with the family , Harris learned German and became a fluent speaker of the language . Harris ' mastery of the language would help him later in life , when he examined the writings of German economists and social reformers like Karl Marx .

He attended Virginia Union University , graduating in 1922 with a Bachelor of Science degree . Harris went on to earn an M.A. in economics from the University of Pittsburgh in 1924 . It was his masters ' thesis , *The Negro Laborer in Pittsburgh* , that started his lifelong examination on the African American labor forces

= = Career = =

He later published two articles in the National Urban League 's journal , *Opportunity* , that discussed the difficulties faced by African American mineworkers . His work in this field also addressed his concern about blacks and their white counterparts . Harris examined race prejudice of blacks by white workers . Meanwhile , Harris taught at West Virginia State University , a small historically black public college in Institute , West Virginia . During this year , he began a long and sustaining friendship with V. F. Calverton . He taught for a year , before he shifted directions and took the position as director of the Minneapolis Urban League . As director , he prepared a detailed report titled *The Negro Population in Minneapolis : A Study of Race Relations* dealing with the living conditions of African Americans in Minneapolis , Minnesota . Harris described the physical and socio @-@ economic conditions of African Americans in Minneapolis in 1926 . Using census data and statistical surveys , Harris tried to show that there was a strong social rift at the workplace between blacks and whites . Harris then enrolled at Columbia University to pursue a Ph.D in economics . In 1927 , just a year into his doctorate studies , Harris joined the faculty of Howard University . There , Harris collaborated with fellow black colleagues Ralph Bunche and E. Franklin Frazier , and attacked old values and outlooks on race .

Continuing with previous writings , Harris wrote his Ph.D thesis on the rift between African American and white labor in the United States . In 1930 , he became the second African American to receive a doctorate in Economics in the United States , following Sadie Mosell Alexander . The following year , he collaborated his thesis with political scientist , Sterling Spero , to produce a famous study of African American labor history entitled *The Black Worker , the Negro & the Labor Movement* . Harris believed that African Americans needed to contribute to the development of a working @-@ class political party in the United States . He expressed dislike for other strategies like rebellion , secession , or the various Back to Africa movements ? which Harris described as " Negro Zionism " ? led by such figures as Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie I.

In *The Black Worker*, Spero and Harris asserted that African Americans could put an end to the racial antagonism in the working class. They wrote about the history of the racial predicament between whites and blacks had stemmed from the days of slavery. They argued that many African Americans had just recently migrated to the urban setting, and had been unaware of trade unionism and its benefits. They stated that the anti-union beliefs held by organizations such as the National Urban League also provided for the racial division seen in the working class between blacks and whites. Harris also was the author of a Progressive Labor Party pamphlet in 1930 that called for the formation of a working-class political party in the United States. By this point, he and Calverton had grown distant; white journalist Benjamin Stolberg took Calverton's place as a major correspondent in Harris' life. They critiqued each other's work and encouraged each other towards greater heights of accomplishment.

Harris, along with Frazier and Bunche, led the attack on the older generations at the NAACP's 1933 America Conference. Harris' radical beliefs prompted a 1935 report entitled the Harris Report suggesting that the NAACP take a more active and affirmative stance on race relations in the United States. As the Great Depression progressed, Harris' radicalism declined. As Harris wrote in the 1957 introduction to his personal collection of essays, he was "emerging from a state of social rebellion [while] still adher[ing] somewhat to socialistic ideas by the late 1920s." He published his most famous economics work in 1936, *The Negro as Capitalist: A Study of Banking and Business*. In the work, Harris wrote about the growing anti-business sentiment of the Great Depression. Harris argued that black businessmen were under the false sense of racial solidarity between whites and blacks. He said that African Americans needed to participate in trade unionism with white businessmen. This was the reason for the problems in the development of black business. Harris concluded that the black middle class was using their racial pride and unity to support businesses controlled by the American middle class. He felt that blacks were not reaching out to whites, and black business would not grow if there was no interracial trade. In reference to black complaints against Jewish businessmen, Harris said:

Despite the heavy criticism against fellow black businesspeople, Harris' book achieved notability and recognition in the field of economics during the Great Depression. In 1937, Harris founded the liberal Social Science Division of Howard University, and served as the group's leader through the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Harris left Howard in 1945 and moved to the University of Chicago, and became one of the first African American academics with a high position at a historically white institution. His move was facilitated on part of the efforts of Chicago economist Frank Knight, one of the founders of the famed Chicago School of economics that fostered the likes of Nobel Prize-winning economists Milton Friedman and George Stigler. Knight had been publishing many of Harris' papers on the subject of economic doctrine in the *Journal of Political Economy* since the late 1920s when Harris was at Howard. With his move to Chicago, Harris' economic ideologies also seemed to change. His writings took more of the tone of orthodox economics, and his previous defense of Karl Marx and other radical economists had turned into critical examinations of the works of these men.

Harris expressed deep concerns about the Soviet Union's totalitarian direction led by Joseph Stalin in works such as *Black Communist in Dixie*, published in the National Urban League magazine, *Opportunity*. However, Harris became silenced on the topic of race, and did not write about it for the remainder of his academic career. Harris spent the rest of his life at the University of Chicago and died on November 18, 1963.

= = Legacy = =

Harris is best known for his work as an economist and social critic of African American business. He had a heavy influence on both black radical and neo-conservative thought. A recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship for Economics in 1935, 1936, 1943 and 1953, Harris was one of the leaders of black economics through the early and mid 20th century. His early works such as *The Negro as Capitalist* set the precedent for contemporary African American radical thought. Harris' great number of works on race relations such as *The Black Worker* served as a model for future

African American studies . His essays in The Journal of Political Economy have played a significant role for institutionalist economists and for economists studying the history of economic doctrines . He is still widely regarded as one of the first African Americans to achieve prominence in academia in the early 20th century , and an influential figure on a wide range of African American topics of interest .