Mirrors of Harlem—Investigations and Problems of America’s Largest Colored Community

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# Mirrors of Harlem—Investigations and Problems of America’s Largest Colored Community

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628 Within the past decade the attention of people everywhere has been at some time centered on Harlem. Never before has this particular section of New York received such notice despite the fact that the connotation of the word itself has changed from Dutch to Irish to Jewish to Negro. One may reasonably expect that it will remain Negro unless there is an industrial encroachment.

It is quite hard to define Harlem in the light of social organizations. A visitor sees that it is neither slum nor ghetto, resort nor colony, and after such a variance of ideas regarding the organization of a community I feel certain that Harlem is not a community. Unfortunately Harlem is almost a social nonentity save for the many distorted and half-truth pictures given by the press—local color, “Millionaires,” parades, cabarets, Charleston, black-bottom, “Strivers Row,” and the like. On the other hand, it is cajoled with the expression “The Mecca of the New Negro.” It appears however, that Harlem is The Maker of the New Negro when one considers the several definite phases of its growth and activity.

## The Growth of Harlem

In the middle days of the last century the Negro population of New York was scattered in little groups to the south, east and west of Washington Square which was at that time the center of New York aristocracy. These Negroes were the servants of the upper class families and found their habitat close to the places where they worked. In the late eighties, the Negro population had increased and moved about five blocks north. In the Nineties, they had shifted to the lower twenties and thirties west of Sixth Avenue, and by 1900 another northward shift had been made to west 53rd Street. Prior to the development of Harlem as a Negro center, the west 53rd Street district remained the outstanding section for Negroes in New York. Singularly, each district in which the Negro has lived has been an improvement over the other. About 1900 the move to Harlem began. Inadequate transportation and empty houses in this section gave colored residents their opportunity. A unique story has been weaved around this development. The first residents on 134th Street east of Lenox Avenue—the gradual filling of blocks east of Lenox Avenue— the spread westward—the efforts of the whites to check the movement and evict colored tenants—the violent objection of the Property Owners Improvement Association—the counter attack of the Afro-American Realty Company—and the beginning of Harlem. It will be interesting to note at this time the economic arguments advanced by the Property Owners Improvement Association regarding this racial encroachment. On December 30, 1913, they issued a circular which included the following statements:

1. The assessed value of property in this section for the year 1913 was $260,000,000 the estimated value of this property is about $4,000,000.”
2. “Is it good business toplace property estimated at more than $4,000,000 at the disposal of the Negro population who have neither the certainty of number nor the financial strength to absorb even 1 per cent, who are not able to maintain a market value and cause depreciation in the value of property in 629the entire district?”
3. “There are about 33,000 Negroes here at the present and more expected, most of whom are unable to pay rents necessary to maintain values.”
4. “General business in Harlem has been seriously injured due to the changed character of the population.”
5. “The Negro population is spreading southward very fast. Each year shows a further increase, and more blocks occupied by them.”
6. “This movement of the Property Owners Improvement Association includes a plan to place at the disposal of the Negroes, buildings arranged for their special use so that they may be able to pay the rents and will not find it necessary to overspread the district.”

Such a movement was futile. Today the Negro population is sprinkled in the districts from 112th Street to 116th Street in this area; checks itself; endeavors again to substantiate itself from 117th Street to 124th Street; in a sudden impact it rushes from 126th Street to 150th Street and again scatters itself as far as 155th Street. In 1913 there were 35,000 Negroes here. Today there are more than 175,000, and we find ourselves in a very acceptable district. The natural boundary of the Harlem River checks movement down the east though there are one or two small Negro districts across the river. On the south the northern end of Central Park seems to be the objective and the population has moved within two blocks of the park frontage. To the immediate west stands the New York Teachers Training School and City College of New York. Harlem is most conveniently located, and is easily reached by elevated, surface, and bus lines. Harlem merchants have not lost money—they admit that business has never been better. They have altered their stock to meet the needs and profited thereby. Instead of property depreciating, it has doubled in value. Reliable real estate men claimed that Harlem real estate was unsalable before the rapid influx. By 1913 it was at a premium. In 1925 it was estimated that Negroes owned $60,000,000 of Harlem’s realty. Though the district has run down physically, there has been an increase in its property values, a natural accompaniment of the change in the racial character of the population. Yet, it continues to be the outstanding Negro quarters of America.

## Population Elements

Society has learned to expect and is probably justified in so doing, that where there are Negroes in large numbers, a social problem exists. Assuming such to be the case, the problems of Harlem are infinitely greater than those of any other Negro section. Here are several different groups of darker peoples with different experiences in their primary group affiliations, different governmental attitudes, all classed as Negroes by public opinion if not by the interpretation of the law. Among these groups are the British West Indian, the Danish West Indian, the Porto Rican, the African, the South American, and the American Negro of the North and South. These groups are expected to adjust themselves to one particular classification when such is possible. Thirty thousands of Harlem’s colored population are reported by the Federal census as having been born in foreign countries, chiefly the West Indies. Charles S. Johnson writing in the *Survey Graphic* for March, 1925, says: “If the present Negro New Yorker were analyzed he would be found to be composed of one part native, one part West Indian, and about three parts Southern. If the tests of the army psychologists could work with the precision and certainty with which they are accredited, the Negroes who make up the present population of New York City 630 would be declared to represent different races, for the differences between South and North by actual measurement are greater than the differences between whites and Negroes.”

## The Problem of Employment

One of the outstanding difficulties in effecting social adjustment for the Negro in Harlem is his job. Out of 321 specific occupations listed in the Federal census for 1910 one or more Negroes were employed in 316 of them. In 175 of them, 50 or more Negroes were employed. The bulk of the male population finds its employment as elevator operators, porters, messengers, and longshoremen. Skilled mechanics are few. The census for 1920 gave the number as 462. There has been a very slight increase in the skilled trades. One would think that the opportunities to join the various trade union bodies would mean much toward improving such a situation. We find that in the majority of cases however, there has been a very small increase in the number of Negro members. This may be due to one of three things: (1) the barrier set up by the union; (2) restriction of work opportunities after joining the union; (3) lack of knowledge on the part of the Negro regarding the specific trade. In the Longshoremen’s Union, where Negroes are present in large numbers, we find the old difficulty arises in that the wage scale is much higher, working conditions better, but that there are approximately two men for every job. For the women, another acute problem exists. The cost of living demands that they leave home to work. Their specific occupations are chiefly public laundry work, domestic service, and the unskilled branches of the needle trade. Employment in public laundries is a new development. Within the last five years the laundry industry has been moving from Central Manhattan to North Harlem bringing with it the opportunity for approximately 20,000 Negro women to be employed in this particular trade. More than 3,000 are employed in the needle trades, a very few of whom are doing skilled work. Domestic service continues to be the one hope for their economic existence. It is singular to note in this connection that the proportionate ratio of Negro mothers who work as compared with white and immigrant mothers is three to one. In New York City 90.3 per cent of all Negro men and 57.9 per cent of all Negro women 10 years of age and over are at work.

The particular problem that looms in the face of any social adjustment is the mal-adjustment of Negro workers. West Indians who come to this country with exhaustive experience along clerical lines and bookkeeping and also skilled in trades find the Negro population unable to absorb their services in this connection and find numerous rebuffs from white employers. The same is true of the American Negro. In effecting an adjustment these persons take jobs as elevator operators, porters, and longshoremen and probably remain there as long as they are in New York. The employment problem, however, is not entirely one of the everyday worker, but it also affects the high school student. Teachers in the New York high schools find it very difficult to place their Negro graduates. Efforts are made to have this group cared for by its own people, but with very little success. A few women find an opportunity through Civil Service to work in clerical offices in the city, while the men seek employment in the post office. The boy or girl graduating from a trade school however, is often forced to forget his training and take up unskilled work. The question naturally arises “What shall 631 we teach the colored children to prepare them for living in this community?” All in all this is the vital problem. The population is governed by a low wage scale for which it is not entirely to blame. This makes it necessary for all persons in the family to work, and while the population is endeavoring to live up to the false standards of living set around them, many different problems arise.

In an effort to improve the industrial and economic conditions among Negroes, the Urban League has been particularly interested in finding opportunities for those persons who are prepared to do certain types of work. It has been able to make some headway in this matter. Quite recently at its initiation, an employment campaign for Negro workers was conducted in Harlem. A survey was made of 258 stores employing 160 Negroes chiefly as porters—and places that had a very large Negro patronage—asking that they permit opportunities for colored workers along with white in other occupations. Despite the fact that many persistent efforts were made, it was only possible to place 4 stenographers with one concern. The general attitude seemed to be either that Negroes were not capable of doing the work and employers were not willing to give them a trial, or that they were totally undesirable. Many of them of course were willing to employ them as porters and maids but nothing more. It appeared that Harlem business enterprises are indifferent toward the employment of colored help and will remain so until there is competition on the part of the Negro business which will force them to offer some inducements.

## Real Estate, Politics and Churches

Contrary to the statement of Prof. Dowd, there are no Negro banks in Harlem or elsewhere in New York. The most outstanding business development is that of real estate which increased from 98 to 247 during the period from 1910 through 1920. Since 1920 there have been an increase and a decrease in this number. The rapid rise in real estate values in Harlem gave many men their opportunity for financial success—others failed. True enough, the main businesses in this community are carried on not by Negroes, but by Jews and Caucasians. The development of Negro business has been confined—apart from real estate—to undertakers, venders, cigar stores, and insurance. One may note with satisfaction however, the rise of an investment company with $50,000 capital. This company is handled by a colored man who has had both academic and practical training having served as sales manager, and department trader for a Finance and Trust company. It is now listed in the 1926 Polk’s Encyclopedia of Bankers and Brokers of the World. This is the first of its kind ever run by colored and its success has been phenomenal.

In politics Harlem is not solidly Republican. Both Democrat and Republican social clubs find seat in this section of New York. A Negro Democrat is Municipal Commissioner of Civil Service. The Republicans still strive for supremacy, and at each election have colored candidates for various offices from this district. The Socialists have nominated a Negro candidate for office of Secretary of State and the Communists continue to fight through the American Negro Labor Congress. However, votes from this particular section are phenomenally few. With a population of almost 200,000 only 22,000 Negroes registered for the last gubernatorial election and only 10,000 of this number voted.

The increase in the population of Harlem naturally brought an increase of churches. 632 In June 1926 there were more than 150 churches between 115th Street and 150th Street. Some of this number moved from the 53rd Street district of New York following their membership. Others are now institutions resultant of the migration from the South, while others are new approaches to the religious problems of the people. Despite the fact that the number is so large, recent figures mentioned in the New York World by its Correspondent on Negro Affairs, Lester Walton, show that 60,000 of 175,000 of the Negro population in New York belong to churches. A meager few of them have community activities or attempt social approach to the problems of their members. Efforts at unification and improvement have been few and with little success. Fraternal societies, lodges, beneficiary leagues, and similar institutions continue to hold sway. The migration gave rise to such institutions as the Sons and Daughters of Virginia, the United Sons and Daughters of Georgia, and several other clubs representative of the states from which they came. These institutions have as their particular aim the adjustment of migration from that section of the country.

## Health and Housing

The problem of Health is outstanding. Statistics for a period of 15 years show some improvement as well as some losses in the battle for health. In view of the fact that at one time it was believed that the Negro peoples in America were doomed to extinction because of the diseases to which they appeared to be particularly susceptible and against which they had seemed to have little resistance, the health problem of the Negro during the last quarter of a century is particularly interesting. There has been a substantial decrease in the rates for tuberculosis, pneumonia, Bright’s disease, and nephritis. For this period there has been a 30 per cent decrease in the death rates from tuberculosis, 25 per cent decrease from pneumonia, and 55.2 per cent in death rates from Bright’s disease and nephritis. However, in common with the whites, the Negro has suffered an increase in his mortality rates in cancer and heart disease. During this period there has been a 120 per cent increase in death rates in cancer and heart disease. The rate of death from violence has increased 60 per cent since 1900, during the same period the white population’s rate decreased 15.2 per cent. Phenomenal is the increase in the cancer rate of the Negro, the per cent increase from 1900-1925 being 120.5 per cent contrasted with 62.7 per cent for the white population. How much of this cancer is due to more exact diagnosis, better reporting, and to the increased length of the life of the Negro is an interesting and complex problem.

For the year 1924 it is interesting to note the death rate of the Negro population in Harlem. Comparing three sanitary areas comprising Harlem with the total rate for the borough of Manhattan we find that in one district the infant mortality rate is more than twice as high as the infant mortality rate for the borough. District 200 which comprises one of the older sections of Harlem has an infant mortality rate of 160 per 1,000 births as compared with 76 for the borough. The average yearly death rate for the Negro in Harlem is 22 per 1,000 while that for the borough is 12 per 1,000. Working toward an improvement in these conditions there are two organizations that are doing much toward this end. The Harlem branch of the New York Tuberculosis and Health Association works on the problems of health through its clinic and propaganda. The Henry Street Visit633ing Nurse Center has its largest corps of nurses, twenty-two colored women, in Harlem. Both of these organizations are doing much toward improving the situation.

Closely allied with the problem of health is that of housing. In the district where the health figures are most disappointing, the housing conditions are most undesirable in natural sequence. The basic housing situation in Harlem is not comparable with that of the lower East Side, but the social results are much more disappointing. Negro Harlem inherited the homes and tenements of people more economically secure than they. However, with its large increase in population, congestion and accompanying standards of living of the district became the particular problem. When the social and natural boundaries restricted them to certain territory, they found it necessary to live within a prescribed area. With the high increase in rents and inability to secure more space, the taking in of lodgers became an essential. A few houses have been erected in this area for the colored. In 1924–1925 approximately three new tenements were erected. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. has recently purchased a city block in Harlem on which are being erected modern tenements for the use of Negro residents of this district. This is the first big step toward improving the situation. The housing problem in Harlem also gave rise to one of the unique phases of Harlem, that is the rent parties. For many years these parties have been conducted for the specific purpose of raising funds to meet living expenses. An examination of several of their unique invitations show that they are held chiefly around the first and the 15th of the month, and that there is always good music and refreshments.

## Need of Study

A group from Columbia University and its attendant institutions visited Harlem a short time ago and on its return wrote up the work of the trip as follows:

Considered as a whole, the trip to Harlem was of real educational value. The points of interest covered were well chosen, the facts were brought out by competent speakers. There was no air of anything having been staged for the occasion. The effect of seeing and hearing so many colored speakers in one afternoon was excellent. There we learned that there were as many different types among colored folks as among whites, conservatives, liberals, radicals; speaking suavely, humanely or with bitterness. One mildly independent, another anxious to cooperate. Here are some of the attendant learnings: (1) The Negroes are capable of taking care of themselves, (2) They are independent and know it. (3) They are quiet and thoughtful—we have had the wrong idea about them—especially about their religion. (4) They take to education naturally, as a matter of course as we do. (5) Their standards of living are good, but depend on their economic status as witness the neatness of the streets in the better districts.

It is not possible to be in accord with all that the writer infers in his conclusions, but it is true that there are certain social changes being effected in Harlem. There is no unnecessary noise or excitement should whites come in on Negro gatherings as would be in other cities. Harlem has learned to expect them. There are no color lines drawn within the race as some would have you believe. Nor is Harlem immune to segregation as some theatres fringing the district refer all Negro patrons to the balcony. Harlem has no one leader—there is no one voice 634 leading it. It is a social laboratory in which racial and economic theories are being proved, disproved, and formulated. It has given birth to a new conception of American life. Its people are restless, socially, politically, and economically. To those interested in social research, it offers a virgin field. But what has been done? Aside from a few journalistic efforts our spasmodic investigations into various phases of its activity by a few students, no concerted efforts have been made to analyze the forces and factors at work in this section. It is not a fixed community, but constantly shifts its social processes. It does not know its resources, but gropingly seeks to find them. Here is a great need for a systematic, exhaustive study of Harlem, not into its single problems, as housing, recreation, health, justice, etc., but an integrated study of it in all its phases—which will emphasize diagnosis and treatment for its many problems.