The Negro Problem as Viewed by Negro Leaders

[Crisis & Opportunity](../index.html) [Harris](#top)

# The Negro Problem as Viewed by Negro Leaders

## Abram L. Harris

*Current History,* vol 18, no. 3, Jun. 1923, pp. 410–418.

Numerous attempts have been made to describe the policies reflected by the programs of various thinking groups of Negroes bent upon lessening the strife occasioned by the vexations circumstances of race in this country. It will be recognized from a most cursory glance at the present status of Negro intellectual attainment that fast lines of cleavage cannot be drawn, demarcating this Negro or that group of Negroes as whole-hearted subscribers to a single and specific philosophy of race relations. Obviously as intelligence increases, criticism of programs and methods sponsored by different leaders becomes more searching. In discussions by serious-minded young Negroes on the various types of leadership among the race one ofttimes hears it remarked. “Most all of these philosophies contain some truth; none of them contains all the truth on the subject.”

The Negro preacher as a leader has always occupied the most influential position in the group life of the Negro. Looked upon as a messenger from a mysterious and supersensuous realm, in possession of an equally mysterious balm for all ills—political, economic, public and domestic— he has been both a dispenser of the “ heavenly mann ” and adviser in secular affairs. But other leaders have also arisen. In extremely rare instances a new leader may attack religious leadership, but generally the former has maintained its influence in Negro life either by paying homage to the religious group or keeping quiet oil the subject.

The few outspoken political leaders had no remedy for the Negro’s ills other than the platform of the Republican Party. The period which followed the Civil War was one in which the doctrine of the ” indefeasible worth of the downmost man ” was renascent. Living in such a lime, the shibboleth of the Negro politician as spokesman for four million recently emancipated slaves was “Equality under the law, assured by equal suffrage rights.” The nearest approach, however, to a philosophy on race relations at this time was expressed by Frederick Douglass in “assimilation through self-assertion.” To some persons this expression connoted force and emphasized internecine struggle, and this group was looked upon as a dangerous element, possibly radical. But as far as deliberately formed organizations and well-thought-out methods were concerned, the politician’s radicalism was inarticulate and ineffective. In the absence of a crystallization of tenets so essential to creating a school of thought, the political aspirant cannot be said to have evolved a race philosophy or embraced a specific school of thought on race relations.

The first organized attempt to raise the Negro’s social status was by Northern Edu411cators, who founded institutions of learning in the South for the education of the Negro. One such school was Hampton Institute in Virginia. It was here that the doctrine of industrial education was born. The founder of Hampton. General S. C. Armstrong, maintained that “the Negro race will succeed or fail as it shall devote itself with energy to agriculture and mechanic arts or avoid these pursuits; and its teachers must be inspired with the spirit of hard work and acquainted with the ways that lead to material success.” Booker T. Washington, while a student at Hampton, thoroughly absorbed this doctrine. After graduating from Hampton he gave impetus to and broadcast the industrial efficiency idea of Hampton as absolutely essential to harmonious interracial contact by founding Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

## Booker Washington’s Gospel

Booker Washington believed the South to be the section in which the Negro could best actualize his greatest potentialities. Recognizing the psychology of the section in which he lived to be inimical to higher education for his race, and at the same time desirous of lifting his black fellows with the financial support which he believed Northern philanthropists would give, he sought to reconcile all groups by founding his program on immediate expediency. In his celebrated Atlanta speech Booker Washington maintained that, “ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the Slate Legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attractions than starting a dairy farm or truck garden.” To those who believed and advocated the policy of emigration he admonished, “Cast down your bucket where you are—cast it down by making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom you are surrounded. Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service and in the professions.” On general racial contacts he held that “in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” This speech, delivered at the Atlanta Exposition, where representatives of the white South, the white North and the Negro race were assembled, gave wide currency to his conciliatory program and Booker Washington was at once hailed the “pacificator of race relations,” 412 the “compromiser between Northern and Southern whites and the Negro.” Although the speech made for him a well-nigh invulnerable position in interracial matters, a few Negroes looked upon it as a repudiation of the race’s political and civil rights, but only a few had the courage of their convictions.

The first person to open fire upon the Washington group was W.E.B. Du Bois, a Harvard Doctor of Philosophy, who was leaching at Atlanta University about this time. Dr. Du Bois branded the speech as “The Atlanta Compromise,” and criticised it in the following, terms:

The growing spirit of kindliness and reconciliation between the North and South after the frightful differences of a generation ago ought to lie a source of deep congratulation to all and especially to those whose mistreatment caused the war, but if that reconciliation is to be marked by the industrial slavery and civic death of those same black men, with permanent legislation into a position of inferiority, then those black men, if they are really men, are called upon by every consideration of patriotism and loyally to oppose such a course by all civilized methods, even though such opposition involves disagreement with Mr. Booker T. Washington. …

In the history of nearly all other races and peoples the doctrine preached at such crises has been that manly self respect is worth more than lands and houses, and that a people who voluntarily surrender such respect or cease striving for it arc not worth civilizing.

Continuing his criticism of Booker Washington, Dr. Du Bois argued:

1. He is striving nobly to make Negro artisans, business men and properly owners, but it is utterly impossible under competitive methods for workingmen and property owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage.
2. He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority, such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run.
3. He advocates common school and industrial training and depreciates institutions of higher learning, but neither the Negro common school, nor Tuskegee itself could remain open a day were it not for the teachers trained in the Negro colleges or trained by their graduates.

There were others who shared Dr. Du Bois’s opinion, but had remained silent in view of the tremendous odds against them. Later, while delivering a speech in Boston, Booker Washington was interrupted during his speech by a question from William Monroe Trotter, a Harvard graduate and editor of The *Boston Guardian*, a Negro weekly. Mr. Trotter’s interruption caused up little confusion and resulted in his being jailed. Although in Atlanta at the time and having no part in the incident, Dr. Du Bois fell that, while it was not customary to interrogate speakers from the floor as Mr. Trotter had done, the latter had committed no crime for which he should be jailed. Consequently be spoke in no uncertain language in Mr. Trotter’s behalf. These incidents formed the matrix from which issued an organization opposing the Tuskegee doctrine.

In July, 1905, a conference of twenty-nine colored men assembled at the request of Dr. Du Bois at the Erie beach Hotel, Fort Erie, Ontario, and formed what was soon known as the Niagara Movement. Among the aims of the new movement were:

1. Freedom of speech and criticism;
2. Manhood suffrage;
3. The abolition of all caste distinction based simply upon race and color;
4. The recognition of the principles of hitman brotherhood as a practical present creed; and
5. The recognition of the highest and best human training as the monopoly of no class or race.

The Niagara Movement never attained a very large membership. After four years of protests and battling in the courts for civil rights, most of its members went over to the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The program of the National Association was formulated to fight civil injustices through the courts. Dr. Du Bois became chief spokesman for the new organization and editor of its official organ, *The Crisis*. In this connection it should not be forgotten that Dr. Du Bois was already author of “The Souls of Black Folk,” “The Atlanta University Public413ations,” “The Philadelphia Negro” and “The Quest of the Silver Fleece.” His latest book is “Dark Water.” As editor of *The Crisis*, Dr, Du Bois is scathing, yet admittedly brilliant and scholarly in his attacks upon the race situation in this country. Maintaining that “the Negro does not want to marry a woman of any other race or a woman may not want to marry this black man or this red man or this white … but the impudent and vicious demand that all colored folk shall write themselves down as brutes by a general assertion of their unfitness to marry other decent folk is a nightmare,” Dr. Du Bois at once became the recognized leader of the radical Negro.

With the passing of a few years the N.A.A.C.P. is seen in its most dramatic Supreme Court fight, which resulted in the removal of the segregation ordinances from the statute books of Southern cities. The organization soon gathered within its folds such young men as James Weldon Johnson, a noted writer and a graduate of Cornell University and Columbia Law 414 School: William Pickens, a Yale graduate and former Dean of Morgan College; Walter White, a Bachelor of Arts of Atlanta University, and Robert Bugnall, a former Episcopal clergyman. Thus, with the coming of the Niagara movement and Dr. Du Bois, we have the genesis of the militant Negro and with the birth of the N.A.A.C.P. the spirit of the Niagara movement and its passionate ardor for civil rights perpetuated among us. Booker Washington’s philosophy of conciliation still lives in his successor, Major Robert R. Moton, also a graduate of Hampton Institute, as is evident from the latter’s recent “good-will” tour through the South.

A direct adjunct of the Tuskegee philosophy is that school of thought embraced by Dr. George E. Haynes, a former Professor of Economics at Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn., and at present Secretary, Interracial Committee, the Federal Council of Churches of America. Dr. Haynes’s philosophy, while not advocating the industrial efficiency idea of Tuskegee, does accept its pacifism. In his book, “The Trend of the Races,” he submits that the only solution to the question of race in America is the application of “good-will” and the “ Gospel of Christ” to the problem. The recognized proselytes of this doctrine are limited in number among the Negro race. For generally Negroes inveigh against a system which makes invidious distinctions between Christian doctrine and Christian practice in every-day contacts. Yet Dr. Haynes has a large audience among the white race, particularly members of the interracial bodies of the South.

## Negro Marxians

The intrepidity evinced by the philippies of Dr. Du Bois paved the way for even more daring attacks by certain young Negroes just leaving the colleges (as late as 1915). The rise of this new group of militants, led by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, soon eclipsed the former radicalism of the editor of *The Crisis*. Through their magazine, the *Messenger*, described as “a journal of scientific radicalism,” these young men proclaimed:

Civil liberty in the United States is dead. Any true reconstruction program must deal with its

resuscitation and reintroduction into American life. Civil liberty for the Negro, however, was dead even before the war, killed by the combination of a hypocritical North and an unregenerate South who colluded to sweep from the Negro his last vestige of liberty. We repudiate and condemn any pretense at opposition to Jim Crowism, segregation and all forms of discrimination which does not accept the principle of social equality, since it is upon the fallacious theory of inequality and racial inferiority that all these evils are established and continued. We do not accept the doctrine of old, reactionary Negroes that the Negro is satisfied to be to himself. We desire as much contact and intercourse-social, economic and political—as is possible between the races. This is not because of our belief in the inferiority or superiority of either race, but because of our recognition that the principle of social equality is the only sure guarantee of social progress—the inevitable trend of evolution.

Not only did the *Messenger* editors champion the doctrine of unlimited equality of the Du Bois school, but sought to make.it a reality by urging the unionization of white and black workers in trade unions on an equal basis of admission. Messrs. Randolph and Owen soon became instructors of Marxian Socialism in the Rand School of Social Science in New York. To their contemporary opponents they became wild-eyed “Reds” of the deepest dye. During the war, the Lusk Committee informed the Department of Justice that the *Messenger* magazine was “by far the most dangerous of all Negro publications.”

Despite the hostility roused within the Negro group against them, Messrs. Randolph and Owen have a following which comprises some of the best trained minds in the race. Some of these are to be found in the Northern and Southern universities. It goes without saying that the bulk of their following is in labor and Socialist circles. White liberals and radicals for the most part are better acquainted with the *Messenger* than are most Negroes. Mrs. Mary White Ovington, a white writer of considerable prominence, once said:

I want to express to you my pleasure at the publication of a magazine, edited by colored men, that makes as its cornerstone the solidarity of labor and the absolute need of the Negro’s recognizing this solidarity. As a Socialist of many years’ standing I have looked closely at the young 415 colored men and women graduates from our colleges, hoping to find some of them imbued with the revolutionary spirit. I have found a few, and I have been especially happy to see here in New York two good Socialists of college training who are giving up their life lo the spread of Socialist thought.

It is claimed in some circles that *The Messenger* editors have receded from their ultra-radical and Socialist position. Whether this he true or false, it is evident that *The Messenger* still sways the militant Left Wing. Speaking of the proposed “monument to black mammies,” it says:

We favor the erection of a monument to the Negroes of Washington, Chicago, Longview, Texas; Knoxville, Tenn.; Tulsa, Okla., and Philadelphia who rose in their might and said to the authorities, “If you cannot protect us, we will protect ourselves; if you cannot uphold the law, we will maintain constituted authority. … Let its while shaft point like a lofty

mountain peak to a New Negro Mother, no longer a “white man’s woman,” no longer the sex-enslaved “ black mammy” of Dixie, but the apotheosis of triumphant Negro womanhood.

## The National Urban League

Although organized in 1910 as a means of effecting harmonious interracial contact through social uplift, the National Urban League was not recognized as a potent factor in the equation of race relations until the recent exodus of Negroes from the South. During this period it placed over 1150,000 male and female colored workers in positions throughout the Northern industrial centres. Eugene Kinckle Jones, a graduate of Virginia Union University and an M.A. of Cornell University, is Executive Secretary of the organization. The Board of Directors comprises men and women of both races who represent capitalists, Socialists, radicals and conservatives, but have as their 416 common fundamental purpose “the bettering of interracial relationship by raising the economic, educational, health and recreational phases of Negro life.” The organization is supported in the main by while philanthropy. Its policy is put into operation by forty or more locals scattered over the country mainly in the industrial centres. These locals are administered for the most part by college graduates and in every case by trained social workers. Recently the Urban League issued from its national offices in New York a monthly magazine, *Opportunity*, under the editorship of Charles S. Johnson, a graduate of Virginia Union and Chicago Universities, a Secretary of the Chicago Race Commission and chief editor of *The Negro in Chicago*. The magazine gives a monthly account of the striving of Negroes and their social handicaps, and expresses with force and ability the motto of the National Urban League—“ Not Alms, but Opportunity”

The debacle of 1918 was just over. Oppressed people the world over were thinking in terms of the newly promulgated “self-determination for smaller nationalities.” “Backwack peoples” were in hysteria, each urged onward by an easily stimulated nationalistic psychology to the realization of this ideal, “autonomy.” Such was the case with Poles, Slovaks, Irish and Indians, but not to any great extent among American and foreign born Negroes. It was left for Marcus Garvey, a Negro of foreign birth, to fan such dormant passions of the Negro into a conflagration exceeding his greatest hopes. Starting as he did with a program which planned to develop commercial enterprise between the West Indies, Africa and America, Garvey soon realized that some bizarre appendage to his movement would give it magnetism. Thus a “Back to Africa” propaganda was begun. The Black Star Line was created; old ships were purchased, and then came revenue and members. To give publicity to his program, Mr. Garvey established a paper, *The Negro World*, and later a daily, *The Negro Times*. He gathered about him such men as William Ferris, a Harvard graduate; Eric Waldron, one of the younger writers, and Hubert Harrison, a noted writer and lecturer. That most of these men had little sympathy with the grandiose African scheme is evidenced by the fact that they were all highly paid or given promises of large salaries. Generally, persons in sympathy with the idealism of a young movement arc willing to make some financial sacrifices for its ultimate triumph. Not so with the highly paid officials of the Garvey movement, as the recent lawsuits attest.

## Garvey Not a Radical

By public acclamation the Garvey movement was termed the most radical that had ever made its appearance among the Negroes. Yet the student of social affairs, asked how could this Negro preach a radical doctrine when while radicals were being imprisoned and deported? That Garvey was not a radical in any sense of the word, but a reactionary, is attested by his utterances and the fact that he was tolerated. The difference between Garvey and the real radicals is that he did not plan the destruction of a Government in America, but the construction of one in Africa. It is true that he advocated the emigration of Negroes to Africa which would sorely menace the labor supply of the Southern Slates, but did he not also preach with one and the same breath that this is a while man’s country? The Universal Negro Improvement Association lost its original commercial aspect. The Black Star Line, the Back to Africa scheme, which was the proverbial “side show,” had gobbled up the circus! Soon this was suspended. Garvey made another grandstand play. He bargains with the Ku Klux Klan and champions their right to make America safe for white supremacy just as he was making Africa safe for black supremacy. As for Jim Crowism in public conveyances, he maintains, that it serves the Negro justly, since the railroads were not built by Negroes but by white Americans. Let the Negro migrate to Africa, where he can build them for himself and, incidentally, Jim Chow white man if need be.

Litigation after litigation, financial difficulty one after another, the bankruptcy of stores and the Black Star Line did not shake the faith of his naive followers. 417 The Garvey movement found no response in the “good livers” among the Negroes, for, despite obvious racial handicaps, they rejoice in being products of centuries of American acculturation. They could boast of some education and of having acquired property. They were lighting for civil and social recognition as American citizens and were little concerned with an African empire. Not so with the bulk of Garvey’s followers. The typical Garveyite had neither education nor property, was scorned by the world of whites and looked upon with condescension by his black brother of the higher social level—literally. the “scum of the earth,” a worker of meagre earnings, a forlorn and dejected pariah.

Naturally, any world, real or imaginary, in which such an individual could be a “somebody,” had the highest charms for him and was considered worth boosting, whether attainable or no. Thus, a world of logic could not impress the impracticability of this scheme upon one of this type. On the contrary, he would go into fits of convulsive vituperation and cling more tenaciously to his fetich, despite its flagrant valuelessness. It matters not that European powers have partitioned Africa; he wants to believe in this African mirage in spite of stern realities. He does not want to be disillusioned; for did not his President-General say that he would tell England, France and the other nations to get out of Africa? It is said that if one repeats a thing to himself often enough he will soon come to believe it to be true, no matter how utterly false. This seems to be the case with Garvey, whom Judge Panken of New York pronounced a paranoiac preying upon the gullibility of ignorant Negroes.

After the last presidential campaign, internal disputes arose in the Socialist Party over allegiance to the Communist International and the policy of direct or indirect action. The discussion resulted in a split and the formation of the Workers’ Party of America, which accepted the “twenty-one points” issued from Moscow. Negroes, particularly of New York, were in this also. The African Blood Brotherhood affiliated with the Workers’ Party, and under the leadership of Cyril Briggs, is alleged to be the official communist organization among the Negroes. Claude McKay, the poet, and a former member of *The Liberator* staff, is also connected with this group. The Communist element makes its appearance as the latest development in racial leadership. At present its following is quite small and its voice is hardly heard outside New York City.

Those who wish to become conversant with the intellectual cross-currents in the 418 life of the Negro must not investigate factional leadership only. There are Negro men and women with whom skin pigmentation and racial identity are purely incidental. They should he looked upon as Negroes who are intellectuals, rather than as Negro intellectuals. Even in some of the organizations that have been mentioned are found quite a number of persons who are not subscribers to race philosophy. In view of this and their training as well as their cultural associations and artistic propensities, they should be placed in the intellectual category. Typical among them are Dr. Alain Locke, professor of philosophy at Howard University, Washington. D.C., and winner of a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford; Miss Jessie Fauset, an A.B. of Cornell University and Master of Arts of the University of Pennsylvania. (Miss Fauset studied in France for a season and is at present literary editor of *The Crisis*); Dr. W.A. Scarborough, president-emeritus of Wilberforce University, a Greek scholar and author; Arthur Schomberg, noted linguist and member of the American Negro Academy; William Stanley Braithwaite, poet and literary critic; Dr. Archibald Grimke, writer and publicist; Miss Frances Grimke, poetess; Dr. John Hope, President of Moorehouse College. Atlanta, Ga., and J. Milton Sampson, former professor of French and German at Virginia Union University, Richmond, Va., and at present Director of the Department of Research, National Urban League, Chicago, Ili. Others who might he included in this group, despite their affiliation with certain organizations, are Walter White and Robert Bagnall of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Charles Johnson. National Urban League, New York City.

Professor Kelly Miller of Howard University has hit upon a grand get-together project by which he proposes to bind all the Negro groups into a confederation so that a solid front may be presented in racial matters. It was last March that the various schools of leadership assembled in New York at Professor Millers request. Communists, socialists, liberals, radicals and conservatives and secular and religious leaders were present at this All Race Conference. The question has already been asked. ”Does this burying of hatchets for the moment at which Professor Miller aims, mean the ultimate throttling of that freedom of political and religious speech and thought—so essential to progress—which the Negro is just beginning to demonstrate?” What will be the result one cannot predict at such an early stage.