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# The Harlem Renaissance

## A Brief History with Documents

**Jeffrey B. Ferguson**

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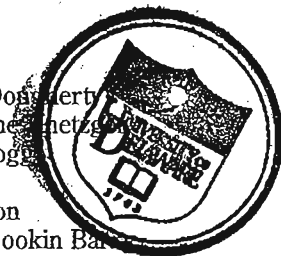
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This is the country to which we Soldiers of Democracy return. This is the fatherland for which we fought! But it is *our* fatherland. It was right for us to fight. The faults of *our* country are *our* faults. Under similar circumstances, we would fight again. But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.

*We return.*

*We return from fighting.*

*We return fighting.*

Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.

## 2

### A. PHILIP RANDOLPH AND CHANDLER OWEN

#### *The New Negro—What Is He?*

*August 1920*

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*The heated debate surrounding the meaning of the term "New Negro" in the years following World War I prompted the editors of the conservative black newspaper The New York Age to ask readers for their opinions on the new radical spirit. Although many respondents, whose letters appeared in a "symposium" in the newspaper from January 24 to March 20, 1920, enthusiastically endorsed "protest" and "manhood," A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, editors of socialist journal The Messenger, objected to the business-oriented Age claiming any association with black militancy. In this article from The Messenger, they explain their unique version of the New Negro concept. Randolph migrated to New York in 1912 from Jacksonville, Florida, to attend New York's City College. A native of North Carolina, Owen also migrated to New York, in 1913, to attend Columbia University. The pair met in 1916, joined the*

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*Socialist Party in the same year, and started The Messenger in 1917. In the early days of their association, they argued against American participation in World War I and for the rights of workers, especially black workers. They were arrested in 1918 for violating the Espionage Act (1917), which made public statements against the war illegal, but were quickly freed when the judge refused to believe that two black men could write so eloquently. In 1925, Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union, which achieved a historic collective bargaining agreement with the Pullman Company in 1937.*

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Our title was the subject of an editorial in the New York Age which formed the basis of an extensive symposium. Most of the replies, however, have been vague and nebulous. THE MESSENGER, therefore, undertakes to supply the New York Age and the general public with a definite and clear portrayal of the New Negro.

It is well nigh axiomatic that the most accurate test of what a man or institution or a movement is, is first, what its aims are; second, what its methods are, or how it expects to achieve its aims; and third, its general relations to current movements.

Now, what are the aims of the New Negro? The answer to this question will fall under three general heads, namely, political, economic, and social.

In politics, the New Negro, unlike the Old Negro, cannot be lulled into a false sense of security with political spoils and patronage. A job is not the price of his vote. He will not continue to accept political promissory notes from a political debtor, who has already had the power, but who has refused to satisfy his political obligations. The New Negro demands political equality. He recognizes the necessity of selective as well as elective representation. He realizes that so long as the Negro votes for the Republican or Democratic party, he will have only the right and privilege to elect but not to select his representatives. And he who selects the representatives controls the representative. The New Negro stands for universal suffrage.

A word about the economic aims of the New Negro. Here, as a worker, he demands the full product of his toil. His immediate aim is more wages, shorter hours and better working conditions. As a consumer, he seeks to buy in the market, commodities at the lowest possible price.

The social aims of the New Negro are decidedly different from those of the Old Negro. Here he stands for absolute and unequivocal

“*social equality.*” He realizes that there cannot be any qualified equality. He insists that a society which is based upon justice can only be a society composed of *social equals*. He insists upon identity of social treatment. With respect to intermarriage, he maintains that it is the only logical, sound and correct aim for the Negro to entertain. He realizes that the acceptance of laws against intermarriage is tantamount to the acceptance of the stigma of inferiority. Besides, laws against intermarriage expose Negro women to sexual exploitation, and deprive their offspring, by white men, of the right to inherit the property of their father. Statistics show that there are nearly four million mulattoes in America as a result of miscegenation.<sup>1</sup>

So much then for the aims of the New Negro. A word now about his methods. It is with respect to methods that the essential difference between the New and Old Negro relates.

First, the methods by which the New Negro expects to realize his political aims are radical. He would repudiate and discard both of the old parties—Republican and Democratic. His knowledge of political science enables him to see that a political organization must have an economic foundation. A party whose money comes from working people, must and will represent working people. Now, everybody concedes that the Negro is essentially a worker. There are no big capitalists among them. There are a few petit bourgeoisie,<sup>2</sup> but the process of money concentration is destined to weed them out and drop them down into the ranks of the working class. In fact, the interests of all Negroes are tied up with the workers. Therefore, the Negro should support a working class political party. He is a fool or insane, who opposes his best interests by supporting his enemy. As workers, Negroes have nothing in common with their employers. The Negro wants high wages; the employer wants to pay low wages. The Negro wants to work short hours; the employer wants to work him long hours. Since this is true, it follows as a logical corollary that the Negro should not support the party of the employing class. Now, it is a question of fact that the Republican and Democratic Parties are parties of the employing or capitalist class.

On the economic field, the New Negro advocates that the Negro join the labor unions. Wherever white unions discriminate against the Negro worker, then the only sensible thing to do is to form independent unions to fight both the white capitalists for more wages and

<sup>1</sup>Sex between the races.

<sup>2</sup>The owners of small shops and businesses.

shorter hours, on the one hand, and white labor unions for justice, on the other. It is folly for the Negro to fight labor organization because some white unions ignorantly ignore or oppose him. It is about as logical and wise as to repudiate and condemn writing on the ground that it is used by some crooks for forgery. As a consumer, he would organize cooperative societies to reduce the high cost of living.

The social methods are: education and physical action in self defense. That education must constitute the basis of all action, is beyond the realm of question. And to fight back in self defense, should be accepted as a matter of course. No one who will not fight to protect his life is fit to live. Self defense is recognized as a legitimate weapon in all civilized countries. Yet the Old Crowd Negroes have counseled the doctrine of non-resistance.

As to current movements, the Negro would accept, praise and support that which his enemies reject, condemn and oppose. He is tolerant. He would restore free speech, a free press and freedom of assemblage. He would release Debs.<sup>3</sup> He would recognize the right of Russia to self determination. He is opposed to the Treaty and the League of Nations. Yet, he rejects Lodge's reservations.<sup>4</sup> He knows that neither will help the people. As to Negro leaders, his object is to destroy them all and build up new ones.

Finally, the New Negro arrived upon the scene at the time of all other forward, progressive groups and movements—after the great world war. He is the product of the same world wide forces that have brought into being the great liberal and radical movements that are now seizing the reins of political, economic and social power in all of the civilized countries of the world.

His presence is inevitable in these times of economic chaos, political upheaval and social distress. Yes, there is a New Negro. And it is he who will pilot the Negro through this terrible hour of storm and stress.

<sup>3</sup>Eugene V. Debs (1855–1926), labor leader, who ran as a socialist candidate for president five times between 1904 and 1920. During his last campaign in 1919, Debs went to jail under the Espionage Act (1917) for speaking out against U.S. participation in World War I.

<sup>4</sup>Henry Cabot Lodge (1850–1894), Republican senator from Massachusetts who opposed U.S. participation in the League of Nations after World War I and was instrumental in defeating ratification of the Versailles Treaty in the Senate (1919).