

**BANQUO'S GHOST: THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION IN NEW NEGRO
THOUGHT**

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This study examines the place of the Russian Revolution in postwar black intellectual circles. It argues that interpretations of the revolution by New Negro writers such as James Weldon Johnson, A. Philip Randolph, and Cyril Briggs shaped their political and intellectual trajectories through the postwar years. Though each emerged with a quite different political orientation than the others, the engagement with Russia was central in the ideological evolution of them all. By demonstrating the revolution's role in shaping the political trajectories of New Negro activists, this study offers a new foundation for the study of the debates over the direction of black struggle between figures like Johnson, Randolph, and those associated with the Communist Party that occurred during the Depression and later.

More generally, the careers of Johnson, Randolph, and Briggs illustrate the necessity for a return to intellectual history in New Negro studies. While the kinds of cultural and social histories that have been written in recent years have advanced our understanding of the postwar moment in important ways, the neglect of attention to the explicit political and theoretical commitments of New Negro writers and activists, along with the intellectual background of those commitments and the ways they shaped the movement's ideological evolution, has obscured the moment's intellectual heterogeneity. Although Johnson, Randolph, and Briggs all ended up in positions quite opposed to each other, in the postwar moment their ideas were much more fluid, as Briggs, the hardened black nationalist, flirted with Wilsonianism and Johnson, the NAACP liberal, spoke of impossibility of democracy in a country governed by millionaires. Only through careful reconstruction of their explicit political positions can the ideological transformations these figures would undergo be explained.

By situating these New Negro writers in their intellectual moment, and tracing how their thought with respect to the revolution changed over time, this study demonstrates that interpretations of the revolution helped shape the political evolution of New Negro thought

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Finally, a truly profound debt of gratitude is owed to my advisor, Barbara Foley. To call her an ideal advisor would be understate things dramatically; she has consistently surpassed any imagined model of what a mentor should be. Throughout the rest of my academic career, I can think of no better way to serve my students than attempting to imitate what Barbara does, from her skill at facilitating a seminar to her learned and searching feedback provided throughout the writing of this study. Though my trajectory as I leave Rutgers-Newark is different from the one she had hoped I would be on, I will remain forever grateful that I was fortunate enough to work with her while I was here.

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Introduction

On the evening of December 1st, 1918, thousands of black New Yorkers packed Harlem's Palace Casino to discuss what their contribution to the upcoming peace talks at Versailles would be. Held under the auspices of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, the meeting attracted attention from well beyond the neighborhood, gaining notice in the *New York Tribune* and becoming the subject of much discussion among the government agents responsible for providing intelligence on black political activity. The federal agents were particularly exercised by the prospect, raised by Garvey, of a black-Japanese alliance against white dominance. Memorable as these suggestions of black disloyalty were to government snoops, what was more revealing about the mood in the room that night was the crowd's selection of who was to represent their interests at Versailles: A. Philip Randolph and Ida B. Wells.¹

The selection of Randolph and Wells as delegates says a great deal about the political moment in which the meeting was convened. Randolph was famous as one of Harlem's most prominent street-corner socialists, regularly

¹ "Negro Editor Preaches War for Equality," *New York Tribune*, December 2, 1918, 4; Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., *"Seeing Red:" Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 79; D. Davidson, "In Re: Marcus Garvey, Negro Agitator," in *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* ed. Robert A. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 305-9; Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 127-8; Paula Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions – Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 584-6; Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida. B. Wells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 380-2; Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1972), 123-4.

commanding large crowds in the neighborhood's competitive public political culture. A member of the Socialist Party, Randolph was also the co-editor, with Chandler Owen, of the *Messenger*, one of Harlem's postwar little magazines distinguished by its forthright socialism and ebullient defiance of conventional political thinking. Armed black self-defense, interracial industrial unionism, and support for revolutionary movements worldwide were all advocated in the *Messenger*. Though Garvey and Randolph would later become bitter rivals, the cause of making sure black interests were represented at Versailles had brought them to the same stage that night.²

Ida B. Wells was even more well-known than Randolph. Indeed, it was her name, rather than Garvey's, that was most likely responsible for the size of the crowd at the Palace Casino that night. Wells had gained prominence as a campaigner against lynching over three decades of work. Braving mob violence, she had compiled a record of Southern lynchings dedicated to exposing both the extent of the practice and the lies by which such brutality was justified. Wells was also an important suffragette, arguing the rights of black women in the white-dominated suffrage movement. By 1918, she was a senior figure in the pantheon of black struggle, as respected as W.E.B. Du Bois or William Monroe Trotter.³

Together, Randolph and Wells symbolized implacable resistance to the violence of white supremacy during what Rayford Logan called the “nadir” of post-slavery black life. In the aftermath of World War I, their election as

2 Manning Marable, “A. Philip Randolph and the Foundations of Black American Socialism,” *Radical America* 14 no. 2 (1979): 7-29; Anderson; Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair: Black Life and the Messenger, 1917-1928* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1975); Cornelius Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

3 Giddings, *Ida*; Wells, *Crusade for Justice*.

representatives of the race at Versailles signaled a new mood in black America, determined to secure justice in the new postwar order. Proponents of this new mood, Randolph prominent among them, were intensely aware of their novelty, calling themselves “New Negroes” to distinguish themselves from the forebears they claimed were too complacent. Though the label itself stretched back centuries, and had gained increasing use since the imposition of Jim Crow, the outbreak of the Great War helped bring a self-consciously new black political generation into existence.⁴

The US entry into the war had prompted a debate throughout the race on what was to be gained by participating in the war effort. Du Bois himself articulated what was probably a majority position, though one that did not lack for dissenters, in his famous 1917 editorial in the *Crisis*, “Close Ranks.” where he wrote “[l]et us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens.” For the New Negro crowd, these words were nothing less than a betrayal. Hubert Harrison, called in his time and after the “father of Harlem radicalism,” summed up the attitude of the dissenters in a response, with the cutting title “The Descent of Du Bois,” declaring the editorial “a 'surrender' of the principles that brought [Du Bois] to prominence – and which alone kept him there.” For Harrison, the war

4 Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro, from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black,” *Representations* no. 24, Special Issue: America Reconstructed, 1840-1940 (Autumn, 1988): 129-155; Ernest Allen, Jr., “The New Negro: Explorations in Identity and Social Consciousness, 1910-1922” in *1915: The Cultural Moment*, ed. Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 48-68; Davarian Baldwin and Minkah Makalani, ed., *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

was little more than a squabble between imperial powers over who should be first amongst the plunderers of Africa.⁵

Harrison was hardly alone in his skepticism towards black participation in the war effort. Though many shared Du Bois' reasoning, plenty of other black Americans saw little gain in risking their lives to uphold rights they themselves were denied. Among rural black laborers in the Arkansas Delta, sixty-six percent of those drafted simply did not answer the call. In Memphis, three thousand blacks fled the state on registration day rather than reporting for duty. In the North, a similar lack of enthusiasm for the war was in evidence. James Weldon Johnson, for example, recounts a man being practically laughed out of a barber shop when he inquired if his barber was going to join the military. The barber replied "The Germans ain't done nothin' to me, and if they have, I forgive 'em." Throughout the country, the race debated what it had to gain from the war.⁶

The meeting at the Palace Casino that chose Wells and Randolph as representatives stood at one pole of the debate, decidedly skeptical as to the country's willingness to acknowledge the rights and contributions of its darker citizens at the peace table. Yet the debate over black participation in the war

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- 5 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks," in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal – An African American Anthology*, ed. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 242-3; Hubert H. Harrison, "The Descent of Du Bois," in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, 243-4; Harrison, "The White War and the Colored World," in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, ed. Jeffrey B. Perry (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 202-3; Harrison, "The White War and the Colored Races," in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, 204-8; Mark Ellis, "'Closing Ranks' and 'Seeking Honor': W. E. B. Du Bois in World War I," *The Journal of American History* 79 no. 1 (June 1992): 96-124.
 - 6 Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "The New Negro in the American Congo," in *Time Longer Than Rope: A Century of African-American Activism*, ed. Charles M. Payne and Adam Green (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 15-78; James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Anthelm, 1968 [1930]), 232; Mark Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance: African Americans and the United States Government during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

effort was only one aspect of the much larger wave of politicization the war helped launch in black America. More global questions arose as well. From the war's beginning in 1914, it was clear that the postwar order would look quite different from the prewar. Seeing this, black Americans began debating what the remaking of the world could hold for their fortunes. An index of the hopes they held for the postwar world is visible in the proliferation of the word “reconstruction” as a descriptor for the work of building the new order. It was to this task that Randolph and Wells were elected.⁷

Despite the hopes of those that elected them, however, Randolph and Wells would ultimately fail to provide the voice of black America at Versailles. The agents from the Military Intelligence Division who had reported on the meeting at the Palace Casino were not about to let the radicalism they had observed there loose on the peace conference, and blocked the passports of black radicals who tried to attend. The famously implacable William Monroe Trotter had to pose as a ship's cook to get to France, and even then arrived too late to have any impact on the negotiations. In the absence of black representatives, the American delegation, led by Woodrow Wilson, did exactly what Wells and Randolph's electors had feared they would, quashing any efforts to raise the issue of racial equality in the negotiations.⁸

The failure of the efforts to shape the peace conference did not, however, dampen black interest in the way international affairs affected the fortunes of the

7 On the use of the term “reconstruction,” see Foley, 14.

8 Anderson, 124; Grant, 174-5; Stephen R. Fox, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter* (New York: Antheneum, 1971), 214-35; Robert Lansing, *The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921), 243-56; Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 181-2.

race. When it became clear that the peace conference would produce nothing in the way of racial justice, black Americans began to look elsewhere, taking inspiration from anticolonial struggles in locales from India to Ireland. One location, however, dominated the rest in the sheer grandeur of its promise of a new world. As the postwar order took shape, many black observers became convinced that it would not be in Versailles that their futures would be made, but in Russia.

Among the speakers at the Palace Casino that night, Russia had already been an important topic of discussion. Randolph, as might be expected of a pugnacious socialist, had followed the revolution closely, preaching the gospel of Bolshevism, as he interpreted it, loudly and proudly. The *Messenger* had covered the revolution even before the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, but the ascension of a thoroughly socialist party to government, combined with the prospect of the revolution's spread, made Randolph and the other *Messenger* writers ecstatic. Capitalism, it seemed clear, was on its way out, and with any luck, with it would go its attendant horrors of war, poverty, and racism. Not without a sense of glee, Randolph (an avid Shakespearean) proclaimed the revolution “the Banquo's ghost to the Macbeth capitalists of the world whether

they inhabit Germany, England, America or Japan.”⁹

Marcus Garvey showed a similar, though more guarded enthusiasm for the revolution. Impressed by what the Bolsheviks had accomplished in overthrowing the leaders of one of the most powerful empires in the world, he saw the Russian revolution as a process from which black Americans, in their own struggle for power, had a great deal to learn. Russia came to play a pedagogical role in his exhortations to the race, as he urged his audiences to “win their freedom just as Russia and Japan have done – by revolution and bloody fighting.” Elsewhere, Garvey showed an appreciation for the revolution's more distinguishing characteristics. In 1919 he celebrated the Communist International's *Manifesto of the Communist International to the Proletariat of the Entire World*, seeing global revolution as a conflict which could “give us breathing space to then declare for our freedom from the tyrannical rule of oppressive over-lords.” Garvey was cautious not to declare himself fully for Bolshevism, noting that “[w]e are not very much concerned as partakers in these revolutions.” Nevertheless, his sympathies with Bolshevism were clear, as he predicted “it is going to spread until it finds a haven in the breasts of all oppressed peoples, and then there shall be a universal rule of the masses.”¹⁰

A sense of Russia's importance to black Americans was not limited to the New Negro radicals. Figures remembered as more moderate also felt the revolution's influence. Alain Locke, for example, dismissed Randolph, Garvey, and their comrades acidly as “Harlem's quixotic radicalisms” in *The New Negro*.

9 “Bolshevism and World Democracy,” *Messenger*, July 1918, 9.

10 “Report by the Afro-American,” in *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 377; “Editorial Letter by Marcus Garvey,” in *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 391.

Even his avowedly pathologizing rhetoric, which called for “an ounce of democracy to-day lest to-morrow they [the radicals] be beyond cure,” could not keep the revolution entirely quarantined from the consciousness of the New Negro literati. Acknowledging as much, Locke situated what he called “the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America” in an international context, amidst the resurgence of peoples “in India, in China, in Egypt, Ireland, Russia, Bohemia, Palestine and Mexico.” Locke’s inclusion of Russia here testifies to the spectral quality the revolution maintained in New Negro discourse, even as the militancy of the postwar moment began to fade.¹¹

James Weldon Johnson went much further than Locke, becoming a fully-fledged partisan of the revolution, recognized as such by his contemporaries, if not by future historians. Originally a race-man on the periphery of Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee machine, in the crucible of the postwar moment Johnson transformed himself into a supporter of radicalism. Even before the Bolsheviks had taken power, Johnson was claiming that the examples of the soviets in Russia demonstrated that “the workingman must become a partner not only in the right to vote, but. . . also in the thing that rules every country. . . namely the wealth producing power.” Afterwards, he cheered them regularly, keeping his readers in the *New York Age* abreast of the latest developments in the Russian offensive against Poland and recommending that they pick up Leon Trotsky’s pamphlet on Bolshevik foreign policy.¹²

As these four examples suggest, Russia was on the minds of many a New

11 Alan Locke, “Forward,” in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992 [1925]), xxv-xxvii; Locke, “The New Negro,” in *The New Negro*, 11. On the transformations of postwar radicalism, see Foley, *Spectres*.

12 Johnson, “The Russian Collapse,” *New York Age*, August 9, 1917, 4.

Negro thinker. This study investigates what they thought about it. It looks at how evaluations of the revolution figured in to the larger contours of New Negro thought, shaping the political trajectories different actors took as they moved through the postwar years. Focusing on New Negro print culture, it argues that a consideration of the revolution's place in New Negro intellectual history reveals that history to be far messier than previously imagined, with political boundaries porous and paths in and out of the radical movement taking subtle and counterintuitive turns. The political fault-lines that emerged from this process would reverberate throughout the next few decades of American life; to take just one example, A. Philip Randolph's disillusionment with the revolution and resultant anticommunism would play a crucial role in shaping the coalitions constituting black left politics during the Depression. This study argues that what would eventually be called "the Russian question" was at the very center of this process.

In the historiography of the New Negro, the Russian revolution's status is somewhat paradoxical. As Timothy Brennan has remarked of its presence within twentieth-century philosophy writ large, the revolution is "everywhere and nowhere in our intellectual lives." In New Negro studies, the situation is much the same. Frequently acknowledged as a factor in the development of New Negro culture, the revolution has nonetheless escaped the kind of systematic attention

scholars have devoted to other aspects of postwar black intellectual life.¹³

On one level, this lacuna is puzzling. The last few decades have, after all, seen a tremendous outpouring of scholarship on black radicalism in the first half of the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1980s, as New Left activists entered the academy and began their attempt to uncover the legacies of previous generations of American radicalism, this work has dramatically revised our understanding of black political and intellectual history. In its early iterations, scholarship on black radicalism found itself in a largely corrective mode, attempting to push understandings of the subject out from the shadow of Cold War controversies, which often centered around the question of the degree of Moscow control over the Communist Party, and “the Negro question's” place within it. The works that followed this initial generation tended to leave these explicitly political controversies in the background, concentrating instead on questions of culture and aesthetics. While earlier scholarship had concentrated its attention on the Depression decade and after, the cultural turn black radical historiography looked backwards, orienting itself on debates in work around the Harlem Renaissance. Finally, a still more recent trend in the literature has attempted to internationalize black radicalism, emphasizing transnational connections and diasporic frames of reference in New Negro radicalism.¹⁴

13 Timothy Brennan, “Postcolonial Studies Between the European Wars: An Intellectual History,” in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 191; Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

14 Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*. (New York: Grove Press, 1984); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left : African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (New York: Columbia

Given this historiography, it seems odd that the New Negro engagement with Russia has escaped systematic study. Indeed, it would not be accurate to say it has escaped such attention entirely. However, the lines of inquiry that have developed have been shaped decisively by the thematics predominant in this last wave of scholarship in particular, as a perusal of what scholarship does exist on black readings of Russia reveals. Two books devote themselves entirely to this question: Kate Baldwin's *Beyond the Color line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922-1963* and Joy Gleason Carew's *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise*. As their titles suggest, these books are concerned with the experiences of black Americans who actually visited the USSR. In doing so, they explore what Paul Gilroy calls the “roots and routes” of black diasporic politics. Yet the way this exploration is conducted leaves certain areas off the map. Taking an often explicit cue from Gilroy's work on the “black Atlantic,” the transnational turn in New Negro scholarship has tended to conceive of modes of black internationalism as operating primarily through racial affiliations, as those dominated by empire have sought to forge solidarities against the white supremacy of their oppressors. In Gilroy, this racial affiliation is the key modality of black internationalism, given life by “structures of feeling which underpin black expressive cultures.” For Gilroy, black expressive practices shared throughout the diaspora as a result of a common history of enslavement constitute evidence of and the material for a

University Press, 1999.; Foley), *Spectres*; James Edward Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Bill Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Baldwin and Makalani, ed., *Escape from New York*.

common racial consciousness, giving rise to a diaspora-wide politics.¹⁵ Michael Hanchard's "Afro-Modernity," another prominent conceptualization of black internationalism, repeats Gilroy's fixation on racial affiliation as the key mode of black internationalism. For Hanchard, black transnationalism is "a self-conscious political and cultural project" characterized by "a supranational formulation of people of African descent as an 'imagined community'" and "the development of alternative political and cultural networks across national-state boundaries." Once more, black international engagements that do not follow the 'route' of racial affiliation find no place here. With these kinds of thematic concerns guiding the investigation of black internationalism, the relative silence concerning black engagements with the Russian revolution from afar makes sense.¹⁶

A neglect of intellectual history, in favor of culturally-focused inquiries, has also inhibited an appreciation of Russia's place in New Negro thought. Despite the different concentrations of the waves of scholarship described above, all of them share a disinclination against the mapping of explicitly stated political and theoretical commitments in their ideological contexts. Michelle Stephens has recently offered an evaluation of the trajectory of New Negro studies that confirms intellectual history's lack of prominence in the field. Stephens highlights Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s essay "The Trope of a New Negro and the

15 For critiques of Gilroy's formulation, see Foley, 166-7; Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009), 219-23.

16 Kate A. Baldwin, *Between the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 77; Michael Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora," *Public Culture* 11 no. 1 (1999): 245-68.

Reconstruction of the Image of the Black” as a germinal moment. In particular, she focuses on Gates' insistence that the New Negro was “only a metaphor...a rhetorical figure.” Commenting on the essays published in the field-defining collection *Escape from New York*, Stephens argues that much of the recent history of New Negro studies has been, in effect, a reaction against Gates' rhetorical reductionism, aimed at restoring the “social and cultural history” of the New Negro. Stephens goes on to argue that the histories of empire and capital must also figure into the story, ultimately returning to Gates to contend that the tropological dynamics he tracks are actually rhetorical traces of these other histories. Plainly missing from this forceful summation of New Negro studies is a concentration on the intellectual history of the movement. The social and cultural histories that make up so much of recent work on the New Negro tend to be more concerned with producing readings investigating the dynamics of the movement's texts and experiences. The explicit political commitments of New Negro writers and thinkers receive far less attention.¹⁷

This study demonstrates what is to be gained through attention to the movement's intellectual history. It argues that the intellectual field created by the New Negro is far denser than has been assumed by even the most perspicacious works of recent scholarship. In evaluating the Russian revolution, and attempting to make its history speak to black Americans fighting their own struggle, New Negro writers drew on a range of intellectual traditions, the specifics of which both constrained the resultant engagements with Russia in

17 Michelle Ann Stephens, “The Conjunctural Field of New Negro Studies,” in *Escape from New York*, 401-13.

unique ways and were themselves transformed in the postwar crucible. The intellectual trajectories that emerged from this crucible could hardly have been extrapolated from those leading in. As such, careful attention to the changing commitments involved in New Negro readings of Russia are necessary for reconstructing the political dynamics that would go on to echo throughout the next few decades of black intellectual life.

To demonstrate the importance of the New Negro engagement with Russia, this study examines three primary spaces in which that engagement occurred, all of them different venues in New Negro print culture: James Weldon Johnson's writings in the *New York Age*; the *Messenger* as edited by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen; and the *Crusader*, edited by Cyril Briggs. Together, they span a wide breadth of New Negro intellectual life. James Weldon Johnson, ever mercurial, had attained fame as an author, diplomat, and NAACP organizer, and was not widely known as a radical. Randolph and Owen, on the other hand, made sure everyone listening knew of their radicalism. Additionally, they belonged to the Socialist Party, and retained that affiliation even after most SP members inspired by the Bolsheviks had left to form the Communist Party. Eventually, the *Messenger* would become a site for vicious anticommunism. Briggs' *Crusader* espoused a black nationalism absent from either the *Age* or the *Messenger*. Additionally, Briggs and his co-thinkers would, alone among New Negroes enthusing over Russia, join the Communist Party. The ideological diversity of these venues highlights Russia's presence in a number of corners of New Negro thought.

Each chapter considers one publication, and each publication illustrates a

different aspect of the intellectual density alluded to above. Chapter One considers James Weldon Johnson's engagement with the revolution. Though his political origins in Booker T. Washington's circles would not have suggested it, Johnson was transformed by his reading of the revolution more than any other figure considered in this study. As he became a partisan of the Bolsheviks, Johnson shed a number of his earlier commitments, and embraced what he saw as a rising revolutionary wave that would carry black Americans with it as it swept oppression from the globe. However, Johnson also hid aspects of his enthusiasm for the revolution, only publishing those aspects of his thought that would not jeopardize his work with the NAACP, a practice I call “doubly conscious rhetoric.” Johnson's career thus demonstrates both the potency the revolution had in shaping the contours of New Negro thought, as well as scholarly productivity of reconstructing his career from the vantage point of his explicit political commitments.

Chapter Two examines the *Messenger*. Affiliated with the Socialist Party, the *Messenger's* enthusiasm for Russia might be obvious. But as I demonstrate, the specifics of Randolph and Owen's alignment within the SP determined significant aspects of their engagement with Russia. Allied with the reformist socialism of Morris Hillquit, Randolph and Owen saw Russia as a confirmation of their evolutionary socialist perspective, largely ignoring or downplaying the aspects of the revolution that clashed with it. Once this affiliation with Hillquit and the SP center is understood, a number of otherwise puzzling aspects of the *Messenger's* politics become clear, such as why it did not join other supporters of Russia in the Left Faction in 1919. As such, this chapter illustrates the

importance of the intellectual contexts in which New Negro engagements with Russia took place, and the clarifying effects of reconstructing those contexts.

Chapter Three focuses on the *Crusader*. Briggs began his political career as a black nationalist, articulating a number of themes familiar from nineteenth-century nationalists. In the crucible of the Great War, however, he began looking outside this tradition for resources. Before alighting on Bolshevism, Briggs looked to Woodrow Wilson as a potential force for colonial liberation. Though his Wilsonian moment has been under-appreciated, it served as a bridge to his more familiar nationalist-inflected Marxism, as disillusionment with Wilson's utter disregard for colonial emancipation prompted Briggs to seek out other forces capable of assisting in the liberation of African-descended peoples. He first found such a force in the American Socialist Party, which he vigorously supported, though never joined. Again, defying the historiographical consensus on his work, Briggs became a Marxist through his engagement with SP, prior to his attraction to the Communist International's support for colonial movements for self-determination. Briggs was indeed powerfully influenced by the Comintern, but its role was not so much to bring him to Marxism as to give him a coherent way to join his twin commitments to socialism and anti-colonial revolution. His career stands as testimony to the twists and turns constituting New Negro political thought, as well as the dangers of inattention to the details of political evolution.

Though this study is not oriented on conceptual or methodological arguments, these chapters seek to demonstrate the importance of a more capacious framework of black internationalism and a close attention to

intellectual history. More importantly, however, this study is concerned with recovering what might be thought of as the originating moment of the black-red encounter. It reveals that political lines that seemed rigid in later decades were, in this moment, protean and fluid. In the postwar crucible, when revolution seemed imminent and a new world within reach, the intellectual contours of the period were rapidly transformed, with new configurations of allies produced seemingly overnight, as all were animated by the conviction that the world in which they lived could be fundamentally remade by their efforts. This study is written in the hopes that someday these sorts of transformations will once again be of more than merely academic interest.

“As Others See Us”: James Weldon Johnson and Doubly-Conscious Radicalism

In 1917, the apocalypse began in Texas. At least that's how it must have seemed to the white citizens of Houston in late August of that year. On the evening of the 23rd, the greatest terror of the Southern white imaginary became flesh as black soldiers moved through the town, killing policemen and others who symbolized white supremacy. Only the intervention of the National Guard, which deployed in full battle dress to hunt down the rogue soldiers and disarm white mobs, prevented the outbreak of full-scale urban race war. When the shooting finally stopped, sixteen whites and four African Americans lay dead.¹

The soldiers' revolt had begun in response to an accumulation of depredations by white Houstonians. Black soldiers invited extra suspicion from white Southerners, in whose eyes a uniform more often than not brought with it the self-assertion forbidden to African Americans. Deployed to keep local civilians off of the construction site of Camp Logan, the soon to be infamous soldiers found themselves doubly condemned. Conflicts between soldiers and locals broke out soon after the former assumed their posts. The most egregious of these occurred when a Houston police officer pistol-whipped a black private

¹ For information on the riot, see Edgar A. Schuler, “The Houston Race Riot, 1917,” *The Journal of Negro History* 29, no. 3 (July 1944): 300-338; Robert V. Haynes, *A Night of Violence: The Houston Race Riot of 1917* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976).

for offering to pay a young Black woman's fine. To make matters worse, the officer then assaulted, fired on, and imprisoned a highly respected corporal for asking him whether the private's story was true. By the time the corporal was released, rumors had already spread amongst soldiers on base that he had been killed. The violence that followed began as a reprisal against that officer, but soon spread.

In response to the soldiers' revolt, race leaders around the country raced to control the damage. W.E.B. Du Bois announced sadly in the *Crisis* that despite the ubiquity of black oppression, he could “ask no mitigation of their punishment. They broke the law. They must suffer.” The military moved quickly to try the soldiers, relying heavily on the unreliable testimony of white townspeople. On November 28th, a number were declared guilty. The thirteen dubbed “most culpable” were given the death sentence. Without opportunity for appeal, they were hanged three weeks later.²

The extraordinary nature of these executions moved black activists quickly to a defense campaign for the surviving soldiers. Du Bois revisited the subject, quoting a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* correspondent who warned that “[T]here are many black people in the country today who will hold that these thirteen soldiers gave their lives for liberty and democracy.” Archibald Grimké, leader of the Washington DC branch of the NAACP, sounded an even more militant note in his poem “Her Thirteen Black Soldiers,” which even the *Crisis* refused to print for fear of federal reprisal. In it, Grimké pilloried America for not hearing “her black

² W. E. B. Du Bois, “Houston,” *Crisis*, October 1917, 284-285. Qtd. in Mark Schneider, *We Return Fighting: The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 222.

soldiers in their dire/need,” and “hang[ing] them for doing for themselves what she ought to/have done for them,” James Weldon Johnson, the organization's field secretary, wrote of the “pain, bitterness, and anguish” that “every Negro man, woman and child” felt “not because they did not realize that these soldiers had been guilty of violating the military law...but because they knew too well the devilish and fiendish baiting that had goaded the men to do what they did.” Johnson was clear, however, that these provocations did not justify the response, noting that “[o]f course it was a crime for them to go out and kill citizens of Houston, so is it a crime for revolutionaries to rise up and chop the heads off of their overlords.”³

Johnson's linking of the Houston soldiers with revolutionary regicide, redolent of both the French and the contemporaneous Russian revolutions, stands out amongst black responses to the riot. Why did he feel the need to invoke revolutionaries, who as a result of events in Russia had become a source of terror in their own right to America's white rulers, in his protest over the injustice of Houston? Asserting a link between black soldiers and revolutionaries was hardly a safe move for Johnson in 1917; during the war the military officials had sought to ban the *Crisis* from all military posts, prompting the Post Office and the Justice Department to follow suit and begin monitoring the journal. For Johnson to all but invite such scrutiny with his comparison demands an explanation.⁴

A look at Johnson's other writings from the period reveals that “More Toll

3 Schneider, *We Return Fighting*, 223; Archibald Grimké, “Her Thirteen Black Soldiers,” in *The Messenger Reader* ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: Random House, 2000), 6-8; James Weldon Johnson, “More Toll for Houston” *New York Age* February 9, 1918, 4.

4 On state repression of the NAACP, see Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 54.

for Houston” was not anomalous in its connection of black protest and revolution. In a piece from March of 1917 entitled “Russian Democracy and the Jews,” Johnson argued that the overthrow of the czar in February emancipated the Russian Jews in much the same way that the Civil War emancipated African American slaves. In Johnson's reading, the Civil War had not given Negroes their rights, but it had freed them to fight for their rights themselves. So it was in Russia. He concluded with the prediction that “the Jews in Russia will now get the right to fight for their rights...a fight from which the American Negro may learn a great deal.” That May Johnson pushed for a further identification of African Americans with revolutionary movements. Arguing that “[o]ld traditions, old ideas, old conventions, old governments, old civilizations are at this moment being broken up and melted down...to be shaped and moulded anew,” he asked whether black Americans would “rise to the opportunity of taking a hand in helping to shape and mould them?” In other words, prior to the Houston piece, Johnson had deliberately cultivated the trope of Black identification with the Russian Revolution. The immediate context of the Houston piece also indicates that Johnson's analogy was the result of more than happenstance. If, as Du Bois argued, large numbers of black Americans looked positively upon the soldiers, conjoining their image with that of revolutionaries created the conditions for slippages of meanings between them. If the soldiers fought and died for freedom, and were equivalent to violent revolutionaries, it suggested that the latter fought for the same cause.⁵

5 Johnson, “Russian Democracy and the Jews” *New York Age*, March 22, 1917, 4; Johnson “Cut Out the Comedy” *New York Age*, May 3, 1917, 4.

This chapter will argue that this slippage typifies Johnson's writings on the revolution, which grew to a substantial volume between 1917 and 1921, when Johnson ceased writing for the *Age*. Though never before studied, Johnson's engagement with the revolution reveals a man profoundly interested in what Russia's experience portended for both the race and global history. Over the course of his writings, Johnson would elevate the revolution to a central place in his intellectual work, so that it became a means with which to conceptualize his own project of racial justice in the United States. In doing so, Johnson's political beliefs underwent a profound transformation, as he went from a loyal Republican to a cheerleader for the Soviet invasion of Poland as the next step in the march towards global revolution.

At the same time, Johnson's engagement with the revolution stands apart from that of other figures considered in this study. Unlike the writers at the *Crusader* or the *Messenger*, Johnson never explicitly called for an American Bolshevism. As "More Toll for Houston" indicates, Johnson's attempts to demonstrate the revolution's relevance to his readers often took place to an oblique angle, through slippery texts that almost always stopped short of explicitly recommending revolution. The explanation for this caution is both political and rhetorical. Johnson was, quite simply, not a radical in the mold of Cyril Briggs or A. Philip Randolph, eager as they were to flaunt their opposition to society's rulers. At the same time, however, there is good reason to believe that Johnson *was* more radical than his writings often let on. As we shall see, certain of his contemporaries certainly perceived him that way. What separated Johnson from Briggs and Randolph, as much as politics, was a situation that constrained

what he could responsibly say. At the same time that he was looking to Russia, Johnson was the NAACP's main organizer. As the head of an organization still struggling to secure itself a spot in American society, Johnson faced far higher risks than Randolph or Briggs for tempting fate with his political writings. As such, his writings from this period are best read as an exercise in doubly-conscious rhetoric, written to communicate his enthusiasm for what the revolution represented, while avoiding expressions of radicalism that would place Johnson and the NAACP beyond the pale of American politics.

This chapter begins with a theoretical discussion conceptualizing Johnson's practice of doubly-conscious rhetoric, as well as a consideration of Johnson's own thoughts on the matter. It then moves to an overview of Johnson's early life and politics, establishing his commitment to the politics of uplift so common among the black middle class in those years. These politics, however, would undergo substantial revision as Johnson considered the race's fate in light of first the Great War and then the Russian Revolution. After evaluating the ways Johnson sought to make these processes speak to black Americans, the chapter closes with a consideration of why Johnson's radicalism would prove to be short-lived.

The Rhetoric of Doubly-Conscious Radicalism

In arguing that Johnson's rhetoric displays a sort of double consciousness, I am drawing on a concept of double consciousness significantly more limited

than many of those circulating today. As Adolph Reed has argued, Du Bois' original concept has undergone a series of theoretical mutations, changing with the political conjuncture. Some of these mutations, such as the attempt to found a grand theory of black literature upon the idea of doubly voiced texts, seem to over-extend the concept in unworkable ways. Recently, Robert Gooding-Williams has performed the important task of delineating a far less expansive version of the concept, centered around Du Bois' argumentative objectives in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Gooding-Williams argues that there are three frequently conflated concepts in the famous first chapter of that text: second sight, double consciousness, and conflictual twoness. With his description of the Negro's second sight, Du Bois "paints a picture of the Negro that suggests the Negro's capacity for second sight is an ability to see what is ordinarily not available to be seen." Double consciousness, by contrast, is Du Bois' famous "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." In Gooding-Williams' reconstruction, it is this sensation that produces the conflictual twoness,⁶ the "two warring ideals in one dark body," that Du Bois diagnoses as at least partially culpable for the Negro's failure to secure full democratic citizenship. This model of double consciousness has the virtue of restoring coherence to the concept by drastically limiting its theoretical reach, as well as placing it in a

6 Conflictual twoness lies at the heart of Ernest Allen Jr's trenchant critique of Du Bois' theory. While Allen demonstrates that the conflation of double consciousness and conflictual twoness only produces theoretical confusion, his critique, as Gooding-Williams argues, applies more to the copious body of commentary on the concept than Du Bois' own development of it. See Ernest Allen, Jr., "Du Boisian Double Consciousness: The Unsustainable Argument" *Massachusetts Review* 43 (Summer 2002): 217-53; Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 286n50.

philologically rigorous reading of *Souls*.⁷

Drawing on Gooding-Williams' restricted definition of double consciousness, the idea of doubly conscious rhetoric thus means simply the practice of writing texts that will surely be measured with the tape of a hostile world. Johnson, personally acquainted the reality of white violence, and well aware of the government's suspicion of black organizations, was careful to not let his enthusiasm for the revolution spill over into texts that could justify repression of the NAACP. While devoting significant editorial space to the revolution, Johnson never explicitly associated himself with its project in the way the *Messenger* and the *Crusader* did. Similarly, he never endorsed black radical groups in the US attempting to create a black bolshevism (though he did aid their efforts in smaller ways, such as funding Claude McKay's 1922 trip to the Soviet Union and speaking at an African Blood Brotherhood national meeting in 1923). Given the obvious enthusiasm the revolution inspired in him, a doubly-conscious rhetoric of concealment seems the most likely explanation for the caution in his writings.⁸

The argument that Johnson wrote with doubly conscious rhetoric is strengthened by an examination of Johnson's writings on writing. Two pieces in particular – an essay entitled “Words and Clothes” and an essay from *The American Mercury* entitled “The Dilemma of the Negro Author” – reveal Johnson's close attention to the use of language to hide and reveal its author, as

7 Adolph Reed, Jr., *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) Ch. 7; Gooding-Williams, 77-83.

8 Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: A Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 168-9; Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 22.

well as the problem of black writing that will inevitably be read by unsympathetic whites.

“Words and Clothes” styles itself a kind of primer on vocabulary and fashion, developing in its course an analogy between the two. Originally written in Corinto in 1911, Johnson later published it in the *Age*. The essay revolves around Johnson's analysis of the trends of style in both fashion and language. He argues that trends come and go, revolving around a certain baseline of normality. The further a trend diverges from this baseline, the more quickly it will disappear. The essay reveals Johnson to be intensely preoccupied with questions of social surveillance, always conscious of his being the subject of the gaze of others. In his estimation, “It takes a man of great intellect--or of none at all--to feel perfectly at ease when he looks around the company and perceives by comparison that his pantaloons are cut too short or his coat too narrow.” Language operates by a similar logic, as words that were once the mark of urbanity can impart “a dull, hackneyed and behind-date air...when their vogue is past.” For Johnson, words and clothes played a fundamentally similar role in constructing his interface with others: “Clothes are those habiliments by which we dress our bodies; words are those habiliments with which we dress our thoughts.”⁹

Johnson's consciousness of social surveillance in “Words and Clothes,” while putatively race neutral, can easily assume a racial significance. His structuring metaphor, after all, bears more than a passing resemblance to Du Bois' image of measuring tape. Here, Johnson's argument seems to be that this

9 Johnson, “Words and Clothes,” James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, Box 73, Folder 391, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Published as Johnson, “Words and Clothes,” *New York Age*, May 17, 1919, 4.

measuring tape is always being held up, and appearances should be tailored accordingly. The text assumes even more significance when juxtaposed with the *Autobiography*, which Johnson was finishing when he first drafted “Words and Clothes.” In his novel, as discussed above, Johnson betrays a similar concern over the perception of his race, though mediated through his own disciplinary gaze on the conduct of the black poor. The essay was thus composed at a time when Johnson's attention was clearly focused on questions of the perception of race. In this context, “Words and Clothes” can be read as a manual on racial self-presentation. Doubly conscious rhetoric appears as one solution to the question of how to dress one's thoughts in a white supremacist nation which will most certainly view them with hostility.

Years later, Johnson would turn to the question of the constraints facing black writing more directly in a 1928 essay for *The American Mercury*. Entitled “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” the text is written as a brief on behalf of black authors and their struggle to write for both black and white audiences at the same time. Johnson argues that black authors face “more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with often opposite and antagonistic points of view.” The echoes of Du Bois are striking. Johnson goes on to argue that black authors are constrained by white audiences' inability to appreciate the realities of black life in the face of the hegemony of white supremacist representations. That which is written for a black audience will thus ring false to a white one, and vice versa. At the same time, black audiences oppose “exhibiting to the world anything but their best points,” for fear of inviting further white deprecation. As a result, black authors are compelled to

oscillate between their two audiences, “posing and posturing for the one audience or the other.” Johnson's proposed solution to this dilemma is for black authors to combine the two audiences into one.¹⁰ Understandably, he leaves the specifics of accomplishing this task vague.¹¹

Though written at some distance from the concerns that animated him in the years following the Russian revolution, “The Dilemma of the Negro Author” nonetheless reveals Johnson's continued preoccupation with the complexities of racial representation. For the purposes of this chapter, what is most important about the essay is the specific emphasis it places on the dual audience confronting black writing. While “Words and Clothes” and the *Autobiography* give voice to Johnson's concern with the reality of racial surveillance (and his knowledge of the way language could be used to frustrate that surveillance), here his attention is focused on the development of practice of writing capable of meeting the expectations of both black and white readers. Doubly conscious rhetoric is one possible mode of writing that could accomplish this.¹²

The single most important piece of evidence implying that Johnson hid the

10 Interestingly, in this essay Johnson also articulates some important elements of uplift ideology that he had moved away from in the immediate post-war years. Specifically, Johnson argues that the development of a “sufficiently large class of colored people will progress enough and become strong enough to render a constantly sensitive and defensive attitude on the part of the race unnecessary and distasteful.” Once more, class differentiation in the black community becomes the engine of racial progress, though here the emphasis is on the progress of the race's aesthetic standards. This suggests that, as Johnson moved away from the radicalism he had embraced, elements of his older political commitments returned to play a role in his analysis of racial progress.

11 Johnson, “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” *American Mercury* 15 (December 1928), 477-81.

12 Though it might be objected that Johnson gives no hint a doubly-conscious strategy in this essay, to do so would have rendered the practice obsolete. Johnson's argument here makes it clear he is writing for a largely white audience. What need, after all, would a black audience have for an explanation that the images of white supremacist calumny diverge from the reality of black life in America? An exposition of the strategy of doubly conscious rhetoric to a white audience would be like sharing battle plans with the enemy.

true extent of his radicalism in his writings is that some of his contemporaries saw him that way as well. In a short report on New Negro writers, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen argued that Johnson was “one of the few Negro editors who knows anything about international questions, about Socialism and industrial unionism.” They also pronounced him “constrained by his environment. He is more radical than his economic relations will permit him to reveal.” In particular, they pointed to his employment by the *Age* and by the NAACP as the most important constraining factors. Johnson had “knowledge of radicalism, economic and political, and the desire to advocate both,” but was unable to do so openly given his position. Randolph and Owen averred that they had come to this knowledge by “reading between the lines.” They praised Johnson as “one of the best journalistic writers of the day,” and predicted that “if he were permitted to say what he wants to say,” we are inclined to believe we would have no fault with his radicalism.” While Randolph and Owen placed the weight of their emphasis on external constraints, it seems more likely that Johnson was self-censoring. Well aware of his employers' political inclinations, Johnson would hardly be the sort to let his radical leanings be known, and then have to be instructed not to print them. Rather, cognizant of the costs both to himself and the organization he supported if his opinions were to become fully public, Johnson kept them partially submerged, writing for those who could “read between the lines.”¹³

The suggestion that Johnson wrote with doubly conscious rhetoric should not be taken as implying a Bolshevik Johnson under the surface of the NAACP

¹³ “The Negro Radicals,” *Messenger*, November 1919, 20-21.

leader and *Age* columnist. Compared to that of other New Negro radicals, Johnson's radicalism was always more subdued. Unlike Randolph or Briggs, he never showed any interest in joining either the Socialist or Communist parties and never encouraged other blacks to join radical groups. He also never abandoned his hope in the mainstream institutions of American life, such as Congress. While other New Negro figures announced their fundamental hostility to the American state, Johnson walked a fine line, investing considerable hope in the Russian revolution and the politics it inspired at the same time that he continued to work through more respectable channels for racial progress.¹⁴

Even Johnson's cautious approach to public political discussion represented a considerable distance from his early political commitments, however. To appreciate the distance he traveled while considering the meaning of the Russian revolution, it is helpful to have some acquaintance with his early political formation.

Uplift and *Fin de Siècle* Black Political Thought

James Weldon Johnson emerged into black public life out of a political trajectory whose intersection with the radicalism of 1917 could hardly have been predicted from its beginnings. A product of Jacksonville, Florida's small but

¹⁴ Unlike Briggs and Randolph, by the time of his engagement with the Russian revolution, Johnson had a real commitment to an organization that appeared able to make real progress in the fight against racial discrimination. Furthermore, Johnson's position as a leader in the NAACP imposed greater restrictions on what he could responsibly write for public consumption.

proud black middle class, and a graduate of Atlanta University, Johnson was given an education which stressed the duty of strivers such as himself to work for the uplift of the community. As part of fulfilling this duty (and to earn money for tuition), in the summer of 1891, after his sophomore year at Atlanta, he set out to attain a teaching position in rural Georgia, finding one in impoverished Henry County. There he lodged with a local family, and presided over a classroom of about 50 students. This was Johnson's first sustained exposure to the conditions in which the majority of his race lived. In his autobiography, he recounts the ways in which the expectations of his upbringing clashed with the mores of rural black life in areas such as privacy, diet, and hygiene. Writing in 1933, Johnson also describes the way in which his encounters with the black folk shaped his subsequent political trajectory. Though conscious of the gulf that separated him from his students and their families, "in an instant's reflection I could realize that they were me, and I was they; that a force stronger than blood made us one." Johnson would go on to describe the virtues he detected amongst the community in which he lived, from their knowledge of "the white man with whom they had to deal" to their "strong men" and "handsome, deep-bosomed, fertile women."¹⁵

Johnson's recollections on his time in Henry County give voice to many of the tropes scholars have identified as central to the ideology of uplift in turn of the century Black intellectual life. His assertion of a shared identity with the entire race invokes what Wilson Jeremiah Moses has called, in his revisionist

15 James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way*, in *James Weldon Johnson: Selected Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2004), 266-67, 268-269. Eugene Levy, Johnson's biographer, describes his family as a part of "that small but growing class of blacks who accepted with few reservations the dominant middle-class culture of the late nineteenth century." Eugene Levy, *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 6.

history of black nationalism's "golden age," "the essence of black nationalism."

As Moses argues, the claiming of a linked identity frequently carried with it a commitment to "civilizing" the black masses. Johnson's own views on the deficits of the black folk are legible in a bit of doggerel he wrote at Atlanta after his summer teaching:

It is the job of jobs to teach,
a colored country school;
I almost side with men who say
The Negro is a fool.

He never seems to understand,
a single thing that is said;
O' if there's anything opaque
It is a "nigger's" head.

Johnson's admiring portrait of strong black men and fertile black women similarly enacts the commitment of uplift ideology to a normative familial structure similar to that idealized in white Victorian culture. In identifying these figures as "the basic material for race building," Johnson articulated a vision of race building that rested upon black bodies' conformation to patriarchal gender ideals. Such a vision displaced the weakening of white supremacy as the key mechanism of black improvement in favor of an increased scrutiny of black family structure.¹⁶

Johnson's commitment to the politics of uplift strengthened as his career

16 Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 40; "Scratchings and Scribblings After My First Week's Teaching in the Country", James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, Box 83, Folder 641. Levy describes Johnson's conception of his work in Henry County as "helping his people to reach a level of civilization they could not reach without his aid." Levy, 37. For more on the status of the family in uplift discourse, see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: UNC Press, 1996), 78-80.

progressed. After graduating from Atlanta, he took a job in Jacksonville as principle of the city's primary school for black students. At the same time, he undertook the publication of the first daily black newspaper in the country, *The Daily American*. As Johnson's biographer Eugene Levy notes, the paper “generally took a conservative” position on non-racial questions, declaring the free silver controversy, for example, to be of little interest to African Americans facing the consolidation of Jim Crow. At the same time, the paper adopted that peculiarly Panglossian stance often apparent in uplift discourse, as when Johnson wrote “many of the hardships [the negro] now suffers are but a school of discipline to fit him for the fuller enjoyment of his rights.” The paper's position was ultimately conservative enough to bring rebuke from other black papers, leading to an exchange with the editor of the *New Orleans Crusader*, who asked “Why always an apology in the colored men's mouths when they undertake a public cause?”¹⁷

During the same period, Johnson was given an opportunity to introduce Booker T. Washington when he spoke at Jacksonville's Emancipation Day festivities. Johnson's address, reprinted in the *Tuskegee Student*, illustrates just how closely his thought in this period hewed to Washingtonian dogma. Beginning with obligatory praise of Washington as “the inspiration of his race; the brightest sign of its future greatness,” Johnson moved into a discussion of the relationship between the race and its leading men. He argued that the greatness of every race was measured by the greatness of its great men, and that the

¹⁷ Levy, 55; *The Daily American*, James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, Box 126, Folder 1111.

disadvantages faced by African Americans were due to their failure at producing such men. Johnson went so far as to ask his audience “Is it not true that the great cause of prejudice against the Negro is due to the fact that as yet he has done little or nothing to benefit humanity - to add to the grand achievements of man?” The tendency of uplift politics to direct attention away from racism and towards the behavior of black Americans themselves has rarely been given clearer expression. Though Johnson gave perfunctory acknowledgment of the weight of racism, arguing that the wrongs perpetrated against blacks were “honeycombing the foundations of the republic,” he offset this with a rejection of any attempt to redress such wrongs. Washington's greatness, he argued, lay in his “not urging us on to expand our strength in fruitless efforts to bring down barriers which will be made to fall only by time's decaying touch, but laboring to cement a bond of friendship and bring about a mutual understanding between us and the people among who[m] we live.” Though as a graduate of Atlanta, Johnson undoubtedly placed a far greater value on higher learning than Washington, his writings during this period reveal a man profoundly committed to the politics of uplift.¹⁸

Johnson soon grew dissatisfied with the opportunities available in Jacksonville, and decided to move to New York, where his relationship to Washington's project would grow even closer. Initially, Johnson left Jacksonville with his brother, Rosamond, to embark on a songwriting career. Arriving in 1902, the pair quickly became some of the most successful composers on Broadway, gaining the nickname “those ebony Offenbachs.” Johnson, however, was not

¹⁸ “Emancipation Day Address,” January 20th, 1898, James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, Box 83, Folder 639.

content to remain an entertainer, and sought out more august means of distinguishing himself. He began seriously working on poetry writing, taking classes with Brander Matthews at Columbia. His break, however, came through Booker T. Washington's interest in his career. Washington sought to draw Johnson into his political machine, inviting him to present a paper at the annual meeting of the National Negro Business League. Johnson prepared a quintessentially Washingtonian paper on the music business, emphasizing the possibilities of uplift through enterprise. Around the same time, Charles W. Anderson, Washington's Northern lieutenant, was courting Johnson's interest in the Colored Republican Club of New York, which served as the hub of Washington's machinations in the city. Agreeing to serve as treasurer of the club, Johnson quickly won respect for his organizational skills, and managed to catch the attention of Theodore Roosevelt himself by composing the campaign song "You're All Right Teddy." When Anderson took the position of Collector of Internal Revenue for New York, Johnson became president of the CRC. Though he was not a central player in Washington's national political machine, his fate was tied to it closely enough that he would refuse an offer from W.E.B. Du Bois (whose *Souls of Black Folk* Johnson very much admired) to join the Niagra movement. His embrace of a movement far more radical than Du Bois' (at that moment, at least) in a little over a decade later could, at this point, hardly be predicted.¹⁹

Johnson's loyalty to Washington was rewarded in the Tuskegee machine's

¹⁹ Levy, 99-105, Johnson, *Along This Way*, 372-374. Later, Johnson would serve as a member of Washington's "Black Cabinet," a group of black appointees who gave Roosevelt advice on racial matters. Johnson, *Along This Way*, 397.

traditional manner: with a patronage appointment. In 1905, Anderson approached him with an offer of a job in the US consular service, a position that would bestow both the respectability and potential for advancement he craved. Through Anderson and Washington's interventions, Johnson received his appointment, and sailed for Puerto Cabello, Venezuela in 1906.²⁰

Johnson proved himself a capable consular official, and soon received a promotion and re-assignment to Corinto, Nicaragua, the country's main port on the Pacific. Corinto would be a far more eventful assignment, as Johnson would find himself at the center of US efforts to maintain control over Latin America, a project he would later forcefully denounce. Nicaragua at this time was ruled by Jose Santos Zelaya, whose antipathy towards the United States and ambitions for regional leadership were quickly becoming problematic in the eyes of Johnson's superiors. In 1909, with hearty encouragement from Washington, a coup was launched against Zelaya that resulted in the establishment of a regime far friendlier to American interests. Though Johnson played an insignificant role in the overthrow, which took place far from Corinto, he would later prove his value as a diplomat in stalling rebels against the pro-American regime it installed until US warships were able to arrive. Johnson would later write in his autobiography that he “was fundamentally aware that the whole mess was, strictly, Nicaragua's business; that it would be better if we were entirely out of it, or better still if we had never gotten into it.” At the time, however, he gave no sign of being disquieted by his role as an adjunct of American imperial power.²¹

²⁰ Levy, 105-109; Johnson, *Along This Way*, 375-379.

²¹ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 448. Levy, 113-119. William E. Gibbs notes that “at this stage of [Johnson's] career, he placed personal ambitions above opposition to imperialism and the

Johnson's career in the consular service was brought to an abrupt end by Woodrow Wilson's election as president. A virulent racist, Wilson made it clear that his administration would not provide opportunities for advancement for African Americans in the civil service. Johnson tendered his resignation and returned to New York.²²

Shortly after his return, Johnson published *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the work which remains the most famous aspect of his career.²³ A substantial corpus of scholarly debate exists on the novel, centering primarily around the issue of the author's identification with the protagonist. Since the 1980s, most critics have agreed that the ex-colored man himself is not a stand-in for Johnson, but is rather based on the life of a friend of Johnson's; similarly, scholars have explored the ironic narrative apparatus the novel constructs, in which the ex-colored man's actions and opinions are shown to be inadequate to the situation he confronts. In particular, critics have argued that his rejection of his black heritage in order to pass as white should be read as a failure Johnson invites the reader to criticize.²⁴

protection of subject peoples. There is little evidence that he felt any remorse about his role in Nicaragua." William E. Gibbs, "James Weldon Johnson: A Black Perspective on 'Big Stick' Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 8 no. 4 (October 1984): 329-347. For Washington's role in overthrowing Zelaya, see Benjamin Harrison, "The United States and the 1909 Nicaragua Revolution," *Caribbean Quarterly* 41 no. 3/4 (Sept/Dec 1995): 45-63.

²² Levy, 119; Johnson, *Along This Way*, 459.

²³ Though the book was published in 1912, the bulk of it had been written earlier during Johnson's consular career.

²⁴ Important works in debate on the novel are: Robert E. Fleming, "Irony as the Key to Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," *American Literature*, 43, no. 1 (1971): 83-96; Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991 [1979]); Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., "Irony and Symbolic Action in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," *American Quarterly*, 32, no. 5 (1980): 540-558; Kenneth W. Warren, "Troubled Black Humanity in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London* ed. Donald Pizer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Donald C. Goellnicht, "Passing

For the purposes of this chapter, what is most relevant is the continuity the novel reveals with the political trajectory Johnson had been on since Atlanta. In the novel, the themes of class differentiation in the black community, and specifically the defects of the black laboring classes, appear as central concerns. Throughout the narrative, the narrator expresses his distaste for the black poor, arguing that the true sin of American racism is in lumping respectable African Americans in with the rabble. He describes “the desperate class , - the men who work in the lumber and turpentine camps, the ex-convicts, the bar-room loafers” as a group who “conform to the requirements of civilization much as a trained lion with low muttered growls goes through his stunts under the crack of the trainer's whip.” “[R]efined colored people,” he contends, desire no more contact with this class than whites do. These sentiments cohere easily with Johnson's earlier expressed unease about the black poor, and his orientation on the black middle class as the both the victims of and solution to racism.²⁵

Many critics have argued that passages such as these are at the core of Johnson's irony in the novel, and that the ex-colored man's repudiation of black life is precisely what is portrayed as his greatest failure. These critics are clearly right to have drawn attention to the novel's narratological properties (which preclude it being treated as a simple sociological guidebook). However, an appreciation of Johnson's alignment with the politics of uplift allows for a more nuanced understanding of what is and what is not being ironized in the novel.

as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiographical of an Ex-Colored Man*,” *African American Review* 30, no. 1 (1996): 17-33; Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 164-213.

²⁵ Johnson, *The Autobiographical of an Ex-Colored Man*, in *James Weldon Johnson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2004 [1912]), 48-51.

From the perspective Johnson had elucidated at the *Daily American* and at the Emancipation Day speech, the ex-colored man's failure was not in judging lower class blacks harshly, but, in refusing his heritage and deciding to pass, abdicating his responsibility to rectify the mistaken impression of the race they gave.

This interpretation of the novel allows a number of evidentiary streams to converge. First, Johnson takes care to put similar judgments in the mouths of black characters besides the narrator. A black doctor in Washington DC informs the ex-colored man that “those lazy, loafing, good-for-nothing darkies, they're not worth digging graves for; yet they are the ones who create impressions of race for the casual observer.” Johnson describes the doctor as an ex-slave, “dark-brown” in color, who is nonetheless, as a highly-educated doctor, a clear representative of Du Bois' “Talented Tenth.” In this way, Johnson combines Du Bois, the doctor, and Booker T. Washington, the ex-slave, into one character. Though Johnson was ambivalent regarding Du Bois and Washington's literary legacy, it would be perverse to make them into representatives of those who have abandoned the race as the ex-colored man would.²⁶ As such, the doctor's opinions do not seem to be of a part with the novel's ironized thematic clusters. These opinions, of course, overlap with the ex-colored man's own thoughts on the problems of lower class blacks.²⁷

Similar sentiments also appear in the less harshly-worded publishers'

26 In his diary, Johnson wrote that “B.T. Wash out to have been a field hand. Du Bois a house servant.” Qtd. in Goldsby, 186.

27 *Ibid* 94-95. Joseph T. Skerrett Jr. has argued that, because of the doctor's similarities to the ex-colored man, he should be read as part of the novel's ironic apparatus, in effect a man who the ex-colored man likes because he reminds him of himself. Skerrett, however, ignores the clear positioning of the doctor as an amalgam of Washington and Du Bois, crucial for evaluating his symbolic valence. See Skerrett, 93.

preface, which contends that accounts of black life have previously been exaggerated, because no writer has looked at the race as a whole, but has instead concentrated on one element, and used it represent the whole. Such racial metonymy rides roughshod over the differentiations within the black community, preventing the race's brighter lights from shining. This preface was adopted, with very minor changes, from a letter Johnson wrote the publishers. The narrator's affective reactions to the culture of lower-class blacks also dovetails closely with Johnson's own, repeatedly noting disgust at the foods lower-class blacks consume. Finally, Johnson would continue to write, this time as journalism, on the theme of the unfairness of judging the race by what he considered its dregs, well after the publication of the *Autobiography*. In 1914, two years after the book had been published, Johnson wrote an *Age* article arguing exactly what the preface does – that the problem with American race relations stems from whites only having exposure to lower-class blacks. If whites could gain more intercourse with “the intelligent and progressive class” among blacks, “the whole Negro question would at once be more than half-solved.”²⁸

In short, the narrator's low opinion of African Americans who lacked respectability appears to draw liberally from Johnson's own opinion. What Johnson invites the reader to criticize in the ex-colored man is not his antipathy towards lower-class blacks. Rather, it is his willingness to abandon his racial

28 Donald C. Goellnicht, “Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,” *African American Review*, 30, No. 1, (Spring 1996): 19; Johnson, *Autobiography*, 36-37, 103; Johnson, “The Norfolk 'Get Together' Conference,” *New York Age*, November 5th, 1914, 4. Compare the passages cited in the *Autobiography* with Johnson's remarks on the food of his hosts in Henry County in *Along This Way*, 254-5, and the poem “Scratchings and Scribblings after my first week's teaching in the country” in James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, Box 83, Folder 641.

heritage in order to dissociate from the picture of the race they create, and the consequences it has for all classes. In this way, the novel's ironic elements do not undermine uplift politics, but rather reinforce them, and the class distinctions on which they depend.

Johnson's political trajectory began changing shortly after his return to New York in late 1914 as he found himself in a political and cultural milieu different from any he had ever experienced.²⁹ He soon secured a job through familiar enough channels. Washington lieutenant and *New York Age* editor-in-chief Fred Moore was looking for a new editorial writer for the paper, and Charles Anderson suggested Johnson. Moore's proposed editorial policy - "conservative and constructive" - was amenable to Johnson, and he accepted immediately. However, Johnson's new public persona as a man of letters plunged him into a part of New York society with which he had little contact a decade earlier. He began associating more with the bohemian elements of New York, and this placed him in much closer contact with the political culture of New York radicalism. Johnson was seen occasionally at Mabel Dodge's famous parties, where he might rub shoulders with Big Bill Haywood or Emma Goldman. His wife, Grace Nail Johnson, was a member of the radical feminist discussion group Heterodoxy, which also included Crystal Eastman and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn as members. Johnson himself had a subscription to the *Masses*, the radical cultural and political magazine published by Eastman and her brother Max. Though Johnson's decisive break with the politics of uplift would develop through his

²⁹ Johnson spent much of 1913 in Jacksonville settling problems with his father's estate. Levy, 121.

reading of the Russian Revolution, these circuits of discussion helped prepare for that break by situating him in intellectual spaces where sympathy with the revolution would be at its strongest.³⁰

Johnson also entered a new political realm when he became field secretary for the NAACP in 1916. Though he had previously been firmly situated in the Tuskegee camp, enough that Joel Spingarn suggested it would be “a coup d'etat” to hire him, several association leaders hoped Johnson could be the man to build a grassroots base for the group. Johnson had joined the group in early 1915, though had played no real role in it until the spring of 1916, when he became vice-president of the New York branch. The offer to hire him as field secretary, when it came in late 1916, would be a significant escalation in his commitment to the group. In spite of the move away from the Tuskegee machine it represented, for Johnson, the decision to accept was an easy one. His new position would not only provide him with an outlet for his energy and talents; it would also fulfill the sense of duty instilled in him since his Atlanta to use his talents for the betterment of the race.³¹

Once part of the association's staff, however, Johnson found himself in an environment where those views would be challenged. In its early years, the association's New York offices contained an incredible mix of ideologies (one

30 Christine Stansell *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 67, 89-90; Judith Schwarz, *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy: Greenwich Village 1912-1940*, (Norwich, Vermont: New Victoria Publishers, 1986), 58, 69, 79.

31 Levy, 179-186; Johnson, *Along This Way*, 471-478. Though many of those who would form the core of the early NAACP had begun their political careers as opponents of Washington, by the time Johnson joined the group relations had begun to thaw. Washington's death, and the slow decay of his political machine, no doubt contributed to this. Thus, Johnson's decision to join signaled far less of a rift than it would have five years previously. Nonetheless, as Spingarn's comments indicate, hostilities enough remained that Johnson's association with the Tuskegee machine was on the minds of his prospective employers.

could argue that this was the case even when Du Bois walked the hallways alone!). Mary White Ovington was a committed socialist, pacifist, and feminist activist. Du Bois was a partisan of women's suffrage, Pan-Africanism, and occasionally socialism. Oswald Garrison Villard, grandson of William Lloyd Garrison and chairman of the association, was an ally of Washington's, as well as a founder of the Progressive Party. In these environs, it is no surprise that Johnson's rather staid conservatism would undergo some revision.³²

Johnson was also in contact with Black activists outside the NAACP, including "the father of Harlem radicalism," Hubert Harrison. In early May of 1915, Johnson had proposed, in his *Age* column, an "open air lecture course" for the residents of Harlem. He obliquely suggested that "[t]here is one colored speaker who, if he could be secured, would give a series of lectures that would be more than equivalent to a year at college, and of incalculable benefit to the community." Several days later, Johnson received a letter from Harrison commending him for the idea, and confirming that Harrison was the speaker to whom Johnson referred. Harrison also thanked Johnson for sending him a copy of the *Autobiography*, remarking that "the book might well serve as a later and more detailed account of 'our spiritual strivings.'" Both the gift of the book and the attempt to marshal support for Harrison's lecture course indicate that the two men had more contact than can be found in the archival record.³³

³² Schneider, *passim*.

³³ Johnson, "An Open Air Lecture Course," *New York Age*, May 6, 1915 (Note: The *Age* did not include page numbers until March 1917. However, Johnson's column always appeared on page four, the first editorial page); James Weldon Johnson Papers, Box 9, Folder 197. Harrison's copy of the book bears Johnson's signature, along with a note reading "with the sincerest esteem of the author," and dated April 22, 1915, suggesting the two had been in contact for at least long enough for Johnson to become acquainted with Harrison's talents.

Despite this new milieu, it is crucial to note that Johnson retained many of the ideological commitments of his earlier years. His *New York Age* columns up until the eve of the Russian Revolution bear witness to this fact. Here, he continued to write editorials policing the behavior of working-class African Americans. The focus on the bodies of the black poor, so noticeable in his recollections of his time in rural Georgia, continues to be evident in these writings, as when he scolds black waiters, and contrasts their behavior with their white counterparts:

Do you think they spend three or four nights out of the week, up to one or two o'clock in the morning, at parties and dances? Do you imagine they will sit up until daybreak at a friendly game of poker? If you do, you are mistaken...No, these men look upon their work as the most important, if not the most serious, business of their lives, and they keep themselves in fit physical condition to perform it.

Such “conspicuous targeting of black working-class leisure activity” was, as Brian Kelly has noted, a central component of Washingtonian uplift politics. During the same period, Johnson illustrated his continued commitment to the American state, chiding a Black child who had refused to salute the flag because “[i]t belongs to the white man.” Johnson argued that the child was mistaken, for even though “many, sometimes a majority of the people in this country are wrong, yet that abstract thing we call the Country is right, and is always making for the right.”³⁴

See *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Hubert Harrison Papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library. On Harrison's importance in black radical history, see Jeffrey Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

34 Johnson, “More About Efficiency,” *New York Age*, February 11, 1915; Brian Kelly, “Sentinels for New South Industry: Booker T. Washington, Industrial Accommodation, and Black

In short, though Johnson had traveled far since his years at Atlanta, and was now immersed in a vastly different political culture from that which he had inhabited for most of his life, in key ways he remained committed to the politics of uplift. He continued to display suspicion towards the black poor, holding them at least partially responsible for their own fate and, at times, the prejudice suffered by middle class blacks such as himself. This attitude would encounter challenges from two sources. One would be Johnson's work in organizing the local branches of the NAACP, which often brought him into far closer contact with the struggles of the black poor than he had ever found himself.³⁵ The other would be Johnson's interest in the Russian Revolution.

“A Great Moment in History”

Johnson's very first column for the *Age*, in October of 1914, would forecast his coming investment in the Russian Revolution. In a short editorial on “The After Results of the Great War,” Johnson argued that all of the European countries would see increased democratization after the war as a result of the loyalty shown by their various subject populations. The French “black troops from North and West Africa” would provide a “new baptism of the spirit of 'Liberty, Equality, and Brotherhood.'” Similarly, England would reward “the much-needed assistance being given by her native Indian regiments.” Russia, Johnson hoped, would not forget the Jews “fighting so valiantly in her ranks.”

Workers in the Jim Crow South” *Labor History* 44 No. 3 (Summer 2003), 348; Johnson, “Saluting the Flag,” *New York Age*, April 4, 1916.

³⁵ Schneider, 42.

Overall, Johnson suggested that his black readers should consider “what this war will finally mean for those engaged in it who are racially and nationally in positions similar to our own.” Here, Johnson displays an early willingness to think race through transnational analogy, a conceptual move common to all of those New Negro figures who sought to make the Bolshevik experience relevant to the United States. Yet as much as Johnson's comments here foreshadow the much deeper investment in the transnational analogy he would later develop, they also serve as an index of the ideological distance he would traverse in doing so. Johnson's analogy here focuses on the loyalty shown by various oppressed races to their imperial rulers. Later, inspired by the revolution in Russia and the global upheaval that followed in the wake of the war, Johnson would make the analogy between African Americans and other oppressed groups on precisely the opposite grounds: it would be the struggle and disobedience of the latter which he would counsel his readers to follow.³⁶

Johnson's first engagement with the revolution itself would be a full-throated celebration of the fall of the czar. In two columns published side by side in early March, Johnson performed a dual evaluation of the revolution's consequences, examining them in what might be called a world-historic frame as well as a more local frame that asked what they portended for African Americans. On the larger scale, in a column entitled “A Mighty Age,” Johnson argued that the overthrow of the Romanovs portended the “abolishment of hereditary rulers and

³⁶ Johnson, “The After Results of the Great War,” *New York Age*, October 15, 1914. One could, perhaps, read a radical critique buried in these lines, implying that African Americans' relationship to the American state was equivalent to that of a colonized people, but loyalty to that state seems to be the perlocutionary effect for which Johnson aimed – a goal which tends to undermine the attempt to write a radical critique into his words.

the establishment of representative governments” throughout Europe by the war's end.³⁷ Importantly, Johnson at this stage attributed the revolution to an effect of the war, and suggested that “it may be that this great war is necessary for the establishment of representative government in Europe.”³⁸

At the same time, Johnson's analysis of what the revolution meant for African Americans signaled the presence of a more radical edge to his thought. Considering the impact the revolution was likely to have on the Jews of Russia, Johnson argued that, while “the rejoicing of the Jews on the East Side” of New York was certainly justified, the experience of African Americans in the United States demonstrated that legal emancipation by no means guaranteed freedom. Johnson specifically took aim at the idea of democracy as a panacea, noting acidly that blacks know “from experience that a despised people can be deprived of their rights, oppressed, and down trodden in a democracy just as effectually as under the worst form of autocracy.” By reading the revolution through the experience of African Americans, Johnson developed a perspective that was both celebratory of the democratization it accomplished and critical of democratization alone as a solution to the problems of oppressed races. In this way, a dialectic was formed in Johnson's interpretation of the revolution, as he theorized the Russian revolutionary experience through the lens of Black history and vice versa.³⁹

37 The Russian Revolution was, in fact, two revolutions: the czarist autocracy was overthrown in February 1917, and then the provisional government which took power in its place was overthrown in a revolution led by the Bolsheviks in October of 1917. Johnson followed the entire process closely.

38 Johnson, “A Mighty Age,” *New York Age*, March 22, 1917, 4.

39 *Ibid.* Tony Michels describes the reaction of New York's Jewish immigrant community. Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge: Harvard

Johnson's interest in the Russian experience, however, did not imply an immediate transformation of his political commitments, and during the course of the revolution Johnson would combine a commitment to uplift politics with a more radical focus on the potential of world revolution. Such a combination is evident in a piece written shortly after his initial appraisal of the revolution entitled "Cut Out the Comedy." In this piece, the conditions of upheaval become the opportunity to castigate the working class African American for "laughing about the very things he ought to be crying over." The pincer movement of revolution and war had made this "the most serious [age] in the history of the world...rapidly approaching its most critical point." Yet any "average group of colored men" contented themselves with "too much story telling and loud laughing." Here, Johnson articulates the familiar disciplinary rhetoric of uplift politics, but their end is not the Washingtonian one of a docile laboring class. Rather, Johnson employs the tropes of uplift rhetoric to argue for black participation in the massive changes taking place in the global order through means such as revolution. In his descriptions of old traditions being remade in the crucible of war and revolution, one wonders if Johnson realized the extent to which his own politics were undergoing revision.⁴⁰

As the revolution progressed from the overthrow of the czar to the Bolshevik victory to the subsequent civil war, Johnson's evaluation of it evolved as well. His interpretations of the revolution tended to cluster around the two poles established in his early responses: on the world-historic effects of the

University Press, 2005), 217-22.
 40 Johnson, "Cut Out the Comedy," 4.

revolution, and on its implications for African Americans. In both of these interpretive frames, Johnson developed readings of the revolution which were dissonant with his earlier political commitments.

In evaluating the revolution in a world-historic frame, Johnson frequently placed a heavy emphasis on its positive consequences. As seen above, he held the February revolution to be a herald of a new wave of democratization across Europe, and the end of hereditary rule.⁴¹ As the revolution progressed, so did Johnson's estimation of its results. By May of 1917 he had widened the scope of the societies which would be affected by the revolution. Noting that democracy had become the watchword of the allied powers, Johnson argued that "they are going to get more of it than they expected." While Russia was the first country to receive this democratic surplus, "aristocratic England and plutocratic America are due to receive a larger share than they now have. Even France, the most democratic country of them all, will have her share increased." Though Johnson named the war, and the democratic ideology used to wage it, as the primary causes of this "fuller degree of liberty," and not the conscious work of radicals, his argument rests on the results achieved in Russia to predict what would follow elsewhere.⁴²

In a remarkable editorial in August, Johnson offered, in the course of an explanation for the collapse of the Russian army, a far more detailed explanation of what he believed the significance of the revolution was. Previously, Johnson had kept his predictions of what the revolution portended in fairly general terms,

⁴¹ Though Johnson was not exactly correct on this point, it is worth noting that his prediction that the fall of the czar meant that the kaiser was not far behind was an excellent bit of forecasting.

⁴² Johnson, "A New Democracy," *New York Age*, May 24, 1917, 4.

centering on keywords like democracy and liberty. In this column, however, Johnson would go far beyond these generalities, redefining democracy as inseparable from a more egalitarian distribution of society's wealth. In this column, written prior to the Bolshevik victory in October, Johnson argued (exaggerating slightly) that “[t]he power in control of Russia today is Council of Workmen's and Soldier's Deputies.” He contrasted the Russians, who “have discovered the long-hid secret of democracy,” with Americans, who “have thought it was in laws; so we pass a new law for this a new law for that, and in the end we find it works out just the same.” The Russian example, however, proves that “the workingman must become a partner not only in the right to vote, but...also in the thing that rules every country...namely the wealth producing power.” In watching the revolution unfold in Russia, Johnson came to the conclusion that “a country ruled by millionaires can no more be a democracy than one ruled by grand dukes.” Even prior to the Bolshevik victory, Johnson was reading into the revolutionary process a global redefinition of the content of democracy. Johnson's language in this column reveals the importance with which he invested the Russian example. The discovery of the “long-hid secret of democracy” casts the Russian revolutionaries as intrepid explorers, bringing back political treasures to the rest of the world. Crucially, Johnson's statements here contain a strong element of universalism. It is not merely that the Russians have come up with a good political system for their situation; rather, they have discovered a secret for which others have long been searching, and which is valid the world over. In praising the Russian radicals for their discovery, Johnson implicitly jettisons the gradualism he had previously espoused. Moreover, he

positions himself decisively on the left, declaring that democracy, to be effective, must mean workers' control of industry. That Johnson took this to be the lesson of the Russian revolution, before the Bolsheviks had even come to power, and that he would do so by referencing the soviets, bespeaks a close attention to the revolutionary process, and an identification with its most radical elements.⁴³

Johnson's support for revolutionary Russia continued beyond that of many other liberals excited by its promise. In the summer of 1920, he enthusiastically backed the Russians in their war with Poland, not only supporting the effort to defeat the Polish invasion of Soviet Ukraine, but also cheering the Russian invasion of Poland itself. Over the course of the brief war, Johnson was a dedicated partisan of the Russian side. Though Poland, newly restored to sovereignty by the League of Nations, was being cast in the Western press as a victim of Russian aggression, Johnson pointed out that upon independence, Poland “at once began a war of conquest.” Meanwhile, the entire war “has been fought as a defensive war on Russia's part.” Johnson also pointed out the way the main imperial powers had fomented the conflict, encouraging Poland to serve “as the means by which Bolshevism was to be held back from Europe.” By mid-August, when the Russian military was camped outside the gates of Warsaw, Johnson was pronouncing the moment “a great crisis in history,” comparable to “the defeat of the Persians by the Greeks at Marathon” or “the overthrow of Carthage by Rome.” As “[i]t looks as though Russia is going to win,” the Soviet state would probably “gain a position as the dictator of Europe's fate.

43 Johnson, “The Russian Collapse,” *New York Age*, August 9, 1917, 4.

It is a great moment in history.”⁴⁴

The unexpected defeat of the Russian military at Warsaw cooled Johnson's passion for the revolution, but only temporarily. Having previously argued that the experience of the war and its aftermath proved “nothing can be accomplished in civilization as it is now constructed and run, except by force,” he could not but retreat from the world-historic proclamations made when the Bolsheviks were on the offensive.⁴⁵ Though Johnson cautiously suggested that Poland would be better off suing for peace than attempting to press its advantage, he was also compelled to pose the question to his readers “Is Russian military power a myth?”⁴⁶

Demoralizing as it was, however, the experience of defeat was not enough to sour Johnson on the Soviet experiment. In November, when the opportunity to rehabilitate it to his readership arose, Johnson seized on it immediately. The occasion was the defeat of General Wrangel, the last of the counter-revolutionary leaders waging war against the revolutionary state. The Bolsheviks' failure in Poland had, Johnson argued, been the result of a canny military strategy, which correctly evaluated Wrangel as posing a greater threat than the Poles. The “mystery of the Battle of Warsaw” was solved. From this, Johnson drew two conclusions. First, “all the talk about Lenin and Trotsky forcing rebellious Russians to go into the army and fight is sheer nonsense.” As he often did, Johnson here used his column at the *Age* as a platform from which to debunk anti-Soviet rumors. Second, Wrangel's defeat “also shows the stupidity of any

44 Johnson, “The Polish Collapse,” *New York Age*, July 17, 1920, 4; Johnson, “The European Crisis,” *New York Age*, August 14, 1920, 4.

45 Johnson, “The Polish Collapse.”

46 Johnson, “The Battle of Warsaw,” *New York Age*, August 28, 1920, 4.

attempt to force a particular form of government on the Russians from the outside.” Though this second contention was considerably less radical than other formulations Johnson had advanced, reflecting the beginning of Johnson's reorientation away from the perspective of global revolution, his eagerness to redeem the Bolsheviks' failure in Poland nonetheless indicates a continued investment in the vitality of the revolution.⁴⁷

As his attitude towards the Polish adventure indicates, during these years Johnson did not limit his support for revolution to Russia. In the midst of Italy's *biennio rosso*, the two years in which factory councils appeared on the verge of seizing power in Northern Italy, Johnson analyzed the struggle as the next stage in the evolution of global revolution. While in Russia the revolution brought with it “a good deal of bloodshed and physical suffering,” in Italy “a bloodless revolution...of the social order” was occurring. As in Russia, workers were demanding “not merely increased wages or shortened hours...what they must have is a share in the management and the profits of the business.” If the Italian workers won their revolution, Johnson asked, “how can the experiment be kept out of France and England?” Written in September of 1920, Johnson's analysis of Italy reveals that while his enthusiasm for Russia may have been in the process of dissipating, favorable developments could still induce him to argue for the importance of revolution to his readership.⁴⁸

Though Johnson's analysis of the progress and possible spread of the revolution served as the core of his engagement with it in the pages of the *Age*, he

47 Johnson, “Exit Wrangel,” *New York Age*, November 20, 1920, 4.

48 Johnson, “The Italian Revolution,” *New York Age*, September 18, 1920, 4

would also on occasion examine specific policies or pronouncements of the revolutionary government. Interestingly, unlike many other New Negro admirers of Russia, he would remain relatively silent on the suppression of anti-Semitic pogroms in the post-revolutionary society (with the attendant suggestion that an American revolution could stop anti-black race riots), focusing most of his attention instead on Soviet foreign policy. In 1917, again before the October revolution, he published in his column a reply the soviets sent to English newspapers encouraging them to support the war effort. After charging the allied powers with hypocrisy for raising the cry of justice while keeping their colonial possessions, it ended “If you are so anxious for justice that you are prepared in [justice's] name to send millions of people to the grave, then, gentlemen, begin with yourselves.” This decidedly abrasive injunction was far from any tone Johnson would ever adopt (at least in public), but his decision to republish it gives some indication of his alignment with the sentiment expressed. Johnson praised the Soviet for its willingness to confront colonial power, contrasting it with the Allied promises to free only “Belgium and Serbia and Roumania,” while other parts of the world languished under “English, French, Italian and Belgian domination.” Johnson commented that the willingness of the soviets to address the colonial question signaled that “The slogan of democracy raised by Russia is sincere.” Johnson's praise for the Soviet reply, and the anticolonial stance of Russian revolutionaries, suggests that the revolution's internationalism in particular resonated with him. Though still early in his engagement with Russia, this column reveals how far he had traveled ideologically since his 1914 columns

praising the loyalty of colonial soldiers fighting in the imperial armies.⁴⁹

Later, when the new Soviet government released its own peace articles, Johnson endorsed them enthusiastically, arguing that “[i]f that much of the Russian program should be adopted, it would mean the longest step the world has ever taken toward the abolishment of war.” The Soviet government, he predicted, seemed “destined to take the lead among all the governments in humane and enlightened action.” He had just one suggested addition to the articles: “That the United States grant equal rights to its citizens of Negro blood.”⁵⁰

“Darkest Russia” and the Negro

Johnson's suggestion was no glib attempt to force the question of African American oppression into the discussion of the terms of peace. The second impulse animating his engagement with the Russian revolution, his analysis of its relevance to African Americans, demonstrates that Johnson saw, and attempted to help his readership see, a profound connection between events in Russia and the struggle of African Americans. Before examining this connection, however, it is worth noting that even Johnson's apparently race-neutral analyses of the world-historic importance of the revolution discussed above were not written for a generic American public, but rather as arguments in the Black counter-public. Their importance, therefore, lays not merely in the value they reveal the revolution clearly possessed for Johnson, but also in the importance he saw in

⁴⁹ Johnson, “The Russian Collapse,” 4.

⁵⁰ Johnson, “Another Article Needed,” *New York Age*, October 25, 1917, 4.

disseminating them amongst his Black readership. As Johnson himself noted, “Negro weeklies make no pretense at being newspapers in the strict sense of the term...They are race papers. They are organs of propaganda. Their chief business is to stimulate thought among Negroes about the things that vitally concern them.”⁵¹

Johnson's preferred rhetorical device for asserting a direct connection between African Americans and the Russian revolution was analogy. Constructed along a number of lines, Johnson argued that numerous aspects of the Russian and the Black experience were similar enough that his readers had something to gain by paying attention. Though this was a common strategy among New Negro authors attempting to convince their readership of the revolution's importance, Johnson's use of the analogy between blacks and Russia differed somewhat from that of his peers. While Cyril Briggs or W.A. Domingo were quite forthright about their embrace of a Bolshevik strategy for the United States, and constructed their analogies to make this point, Johnson was less direct in his argumentation. Rather than arguing that an American Bolshevism would solve the race problem, Johnson used his analogies to suggest to his readers that the Russian experience carried important lessons for black Americans, while rarely attempting to specify exactly what those lessons were. Politics no doubt explain at least part of this comparative reticence; Johnson never gave signs of being as committed to socialism or revolution as writers at the *Crusader* and the *Messenger*, and as such, it is not surprising that he did not argue as forthrightly for those politics in

⁵¹ Johnson, “Do You Read Negro Papers?” *New York Age*, October 22, 1914, 4. For the idea of a Black counter-public, see Michael Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 23-9.

an American context. Additionally, however, it seems likely that the aspects of the arguments Johnson left up to his readers were a strategic choice as well, governed by his canny evaluations of how his writings would be perceived. This possibility will be considered in greater detail below.

In Johnson's first column after the revolution, the form this analogy would take is already visible. Here, Johnson argues for a specific analogy between the Jews of Russia after the revolution and the situation of African Americans after the Civil War. Both were now juridically free, yet remained oppressed. Both races were, Johnson said, now free to fight for their rights. Johnson predicted that, for the Jews, "it will be a hard stubborn fight, a fight from which the American Negro may learn a great deal." As described above, Johnson's prediction of a hard fight for the Russian Jews was based on his reading of African American history, and the insufficiency of democracy as a means to end oppression. At the same time, his exhortation to his readers to learn from that struggle illustrates the second moment of Johnson's interpretive dialectic, in which his reading of the revolution was brought home to illuminate or inspire the struggles of his race. Though theorists such as Edward Said have examined the phenomenon of "traveling theory," Johnson's discussion of the black and Russian experiences, by reading each against the grain of the other, produced a kind of "traveling history," in which the lessons he drew from the history of African Americans traveled to Russia to organize his narrative of the revolution there, while simultaneously being transformed in the construction of that narrative.⁵²

⁵² Edward Said, "Traveling Theory" *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226-47.

Johnson's practice of bringing Russian history home was frequently accompanied by a pedagogical imperative to his readers. In these writings, the actual practice of the Bolsheviks was held up as an example to be emulated. In one column, for example, he compared the calumnies spread in the popular press about the Bolsheviks with the racist images of African Americans that circulated in the same venues. Detecting a certain liberalization of attitudes towards Russia in the spring of 1920, Johnson asked "Why this sudden and complete right-about-face on the part of the capitalistic press of the world?" The answer, he wrote, is that "Russia had the stamina, the strength, the resources to compel the change." In this, Russia stands as a "direct lesson" to black Americans. It is not enough that their cause and just; the question is what is necessary "to force the nation to accord [them] what [they are] entitled to."⁵³

Elsewhere, Johnson's pedagogical imperatives took a more classically textual form, as he recommended his readers familiarize themselves with the works of the revolution's leaders. Trotsky's pamphlet "The Bolsheviks and World Peace" came in for special recommendation. Johnson wrote that the tract sheds "a new light on one of the most vital movement's in the world's history." In the space of four sentences, Johnson took three opportunities to emphasize the book's importance to African Americans specifically, recommending it to "all intelligent colored people." The editorial in which this endorsement appeared, entitled "Two Books," also praised the latest poetry collection published by William Stanley Braithwaite, a well-respected black poet and anthologist. In juxtaposing his book and Trotsky's, Johnson was situating the latter in a

53 Johnson, "Unfaking the Public of Russia," *New York Age*, May 20, 1920, 4.

discursive space in which the relevance of the texts in question to his readership was presumed to be obvious.⁵⁴

Johnson also constructed the analogy between blacks and revolutionary Russia on a grander scale. Interpreting the post-revolutionary stalemate between the Entente and Russia in terms of a clash of civilizations, Johnson that “[t]he present struggle is far more vital than the Great War between the Allied Powers and the Germanic Powers.” That war was merely “a war for the control of world markets.”⁵⁵ The present struggle, however, “is a struggle between two concepts of civilization. Two concepts that are diametrically opposed.” Johnson's language here is redolent of that of racial reactionaries such as Oswald Spengler, Madison Grant, and Lothrop Stoddard, who held that the Bolshevism were an expression of Russia's “Asiatic” essence, utterly foreign to bourgeois Europe.⁵⁶ Crucially, however, Johnson inverted the evaluative valence of these writers, praising Russia and condemning Europe. Indeed, placed in the context of Johnson's other writings, his assessment of this civilizational strife becomes even clearer. Towards the beginning of the war, Johnson had written that “tweenieh [sic] century civilization, the socalled [sic] white man's civilization, is nothing more than a thin veneer, and underneath this thin veneer is the same cruel barbarism that Caesar found two thousand years ago.” Though Johnson had previously

54 Johnson, “Two Books,” *New York Age*, February 2, 1918, 4. Trotsky's pamphlet, originally published in 1914 and titled “The War and the International,” was published by Boni and Liveright in 1918 as an English-language statement of Bolshevik foreign policy.

55 Johnson's language here is suggestive of the impact reading pamphlets such as Trotsky's had on him.

56 Oswald Spengler would later write, for example, that “Russia, after suffering in 1916 its second great defeat, from the West, has removed its 'white' mask, to the mocking satisfaction of its ally England, has again become Asiatic with all its soul, and is filled with a burning hatred of Europe.” Oswald Spengler, *The Hour of Decision: Part One: Germany and World-Historical Evolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1934), 209.

articulated an uplift politics in which the civilizationist aspirations of the black bourgeoisie were to be the salvation of the race, the onset of the world war and the Russian revolution had worked to convince him that Western civilization was something to be opposed, not imitated. Importantly, Johnson's criticisms of the "white man's civilization" position African Americans outside of the perpetrators of the crimes he condemned. With this in mind, Russia and African Americans come into alignment in Johnson's civilizational scheme. Here, Johnson's argument anticipates Cedric Robinson's famous definition of the Black radical tradition as the negation of Western civilization. Whereas Robinson disqualified Marxism from this tradition as a Eurocentric product of Western civilization, however, Johnson read the first successful Marxist revolution as a defining moment in that negation.⁵⁷

Not all of Johnson's invocations of Russia, however, were mobilized in the direction of radical critique. As descriptions of the alleged horrors of the revolution flooded the American popular press, Johnson drew on the powerful negative associations of the revolution to further his argument for Black equality. In Johnson's response to the Houston executions, for example, revolutionaries figure as criminals, whose unequivocally negative image Johnson uses to demonstrate his own forthright condemnation of the Black soldiers' actions. Similarly, in a column examining perceptions of the United States in Latin America, Johnson asked "Does [the US] think that the opinion which she has of Bolshevik Russia has any justification for being worse than the opinion which

⁵⁷ Johnson, "The European Crisis"; Johnson, "The US and Germany," *New York Age*, May 13, 1915. See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1983]).

Bolshevik Russia has of her?” Evoking “Red Summer's” wave of race riots, Johnson reminded his readers that the other nations of the hemisphere had perfectly good reasons for holding a low opinion of American civilization. Johnson once again drew on an analogy with Russia to make his point, noting that “if the stories which we hear about mob violence in Russia are true, it is also true that the violence is being direct against those who are considered to be against the authority of the existing government; but [in the US] the mobs beat and killed loyal and unoffending American citizens.” Equating tales of Bolshevik terror with American race riots, Johnson attempted to argue that the latter was even worse, given the loyalty of African Americans. Elsewhere, he evoked Russia to similar effect. Responding to a Memphis news report that condemned violence by strikers with the indignant sniff “This is America, not Russia,” Johnson focused attention on the ubiquity of similar violence against black citizens in Memphis. “To be sure,” he concluded, “this is America and not Russia. And in some parts of the country that means worse than Russia.” Johnson's commentary on Russia is decidedly ambivalent here. On the one hand, he argues that racial violence in the United States is worse than the violence in Russia; on the other, he does nothing to counter the Memphis paper's assumption that Russia was a land of lawlessness. Johnson's coverage of the Elaine sharecropper massacre was similar, arguing that it was worse than anything “done in darkest Russia or any other part of the world.” In these cases, Johnson draws on the counterrevolutionary image of Bolshevik state terror circulating in the American state press to make his point, a gesture which seems to run counter to the project of identifying African Americans with revolutionary Russia.

Moreover, Johnson's purpose in accepting this portrayal of the revolution was to write African Americans as citizens loyal to the United States, and thus undeserving of the oppression they suffered.⁵⁸

Such rhetoric seems difficult to reconcile with Johnson's other writings on the revolution. In some texts, he praises the political values of the Bolsheviks, writes glowingly of their progress, and exhorts his readers to learn from their example. In others, he accepts the popular press' depiction of the Bolsheviks as violent criminals, and uses this image to build a case for the civic virtue of black Americans. His corpus seems to contain a double movement, in which Johnson's attitude towards the revolution appears as an elliptical orbit, moving both towards and away from it at the same time.

Yet, as the analysis of "More Toll for Houston" at the beginning of this chapter suggests, this double movement was not simply a contradiction on Johnson's part, but an attempt to negotiate the dangerous terrain of black radical politics in the New Negro era. As the American state rapidly trained its gaze on the upsurge of black radicalism after the war, the open promotion of radical politics by African Americans became a costly endeavor, as figures from A. Philip Randolph to Marcus Garvey quickly discovered. With this wave of repression in mind, and in the context of his other writings, Johnson's apparently negative evaluations of the Russian revolution in this period can be read as a kind of doubly conscious rhetoric, a language that would be legible to his intended readers, but at the same time opaque to those who read his articles searching only

⁵⁸ Johnson, "As Others See Us," *New York Age*, August 23, 1919, 4; Johnson, "Awful! Isn't It?" *New York Age*, July 19, 1919, 4; Johnson, "The Arkansas Hoax," *New York Age*, October 18, 1919, 4.

for signifiers of disloyalty.

Bringing the Revolution Home

Johnson's hesitation to devote all of his political energy to the project symbolized by the Russian revolution did not prevent his political orientation from undergoing substantial revision as a result of the engagement he did have. On a host of questions, from the causes and consequences of black oppression to the character of American democracy, Johnson espoused markedly different perspectives before and after his interest in the revolution. Abandoning the perspective that the race would only advance by producing great men who would no longer be judged by the failings of their lessers, he re-conceptualized racial progress as the struggle to win power from white oppressors. Similarly, Johnson developed a critique of the limitations of democracy in the face of economic inequality. He also became far more critical of American foreign policy. Finally, Johnson formed a closer relationship with domestic radical forces, seeing white workers as an important potential ally for the black struggle.

The most important changes in Johnson's thought came around his conception of racial progress. In the course of his reading of the revolution, he moved decisively away from his remaining Washingtonian commitments and towards a conception of racial progress as being propelled by the struggles of the masses of black Americans. No longer concerned with training a disciplinary gaze on the lives of working-class blacks, Johnson instead encouraged them to follow the example of revolutionaries in Russia and elsewhere. The appearance

of “radicalism” as a positive term in Johnson's discussions of racial struggle serve as one index of this change. This shift is most visible in an unpublished address, most likely to the NAACP, from 1918 entitled “What Will the Negro Get Out of the War?” Here, Johnson delivered a report on the prospects for black advancement that exactly reversed the terms he had articulated in his first editorial for the *Age*. There he had argued that African Americans were in a position analogous to that of the colonial subjects of France and England, and that the loyalty of the latter groups would win them the respect and justice they deserved from their rulers. Here, Johnson contemptuously dismissed such sentiments, thundering “The Negro will get out of the war just as much as he is prepared to take; and by take I do not mean merely receive; I mean as much as he is able to seize, to lay hold on and keep...If loyalty to the nation and fighting its battles could give us our full rights we would have had them long ago.” Johnson acknowledged that such sentiments “may seem to be wild-eyed radicalism,” but that this was no indictment, as “radicalism and conservatism are not necessarily antagonistic, they may be and really ought to be complementary.” Ultimately, Johnson advanced a biting condemnation of those who counseled Negroes to wait, declaring

The people who through all the ages have preached to the submerged and suppressed classes to wait and be patient for things that those classes were justly entitled to, have been people who either did not want to see justice done or who did not want their own consciences disturbed by reminders of the injustices for which they were wholly or partly responsible.

The language of “submerged and suppressed classes” suggests a conception of justice that is broader than the travails of the race, and is congruent with

Johnson's frequently enunciated internationalism in this period.. Though Johnson's audience here allowed him to be forthright than he would be in many of his *Age* columns, he nonetheless noted the need for circumspection in other contexts. He recognized that “[s]ome of us by nature or by circumstances may not be able to take a radical stand. All right and good. But if any of us are not able to fight, for God's sake, let them not stop somebody else from fighting.” Johnson's comparative openness with this more restricted audience strengthens the interpretation of his *Age* writings as employing a doubly conscious rhetoric, as does his recognition of the constraints existing in other circumstances. Though his assertion that radicalism and conservatism are complementary leaves much to the imagination, it nonetheless marks an orientation towards radicalism absent in his writings prior to the revolution.⁵⁹

That same year, Johnson demonstrated his newfound appreciation for radicalism in an article for the *Liberator*, the successor to the *Masses* and one of the most important venues for pro-Bolshevik sentiment in the country. Johnson's article, “What is the Negro Doing for Himself?”, was meant to introduce the NAACP and its work to readers of the *Liberator*. In it, he describes the NAACP as “a radical, militant organization.” Though some allowance must be made for Johnson's audience here, to whom such words had more positive connotations than to most readers, his description is nonetheless significant for two reasons. First, he thought it was at least plausible to describe the work of the NAACP, which he was then leading, as radical. Second, he thought it important

⁵⁹ Johnson, “What Will the Negro Get Out of the War,” 1918, James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, Box 77, Folder 568.

that the *Liberator's* readership think of the NAACP's work as in some way identified with their own. More important than his description of the organization, however, was his situation of it in the historical conjuncture in which he wrote. The work of the NAACP, he asserted, was an manifestation of how the Negro "has been seized by the spirit that has taken hold of all the submerged classes of the world....He believes that something new and better is going to be moulded, and he is determined to have a hand in moulding it." The recurrence of the language of submerged classes rising illustrates the importance Johnson placed upon this theorization of the conjuncture. That he attempted to situate the black struggle for equality in this process shows how fundamentally it affected his conceptualization of that struggle.⁶⁰

Johnson's article in the *Liberator* was far from the only engagement he had with the main circles of American radicalism in these years. According to government records, Johnson addressed the 1923 convention of the African Blood Brotherhood, by that time an organization led by members of the Communist Party (at the time called the Workers Party). In 1922, he was also the main force behind fundraising for Claude McKay's trip to the Soviet Union for the 1922 International Congress of the Communist International.⁶¹

In the *Age* Johnson also showed signs of an appreciation of the value of radicalism, though in more muted tones than he used in private. In two articles from mid-1919, Johnson examined the question of "Radicalism and the Negro." His primary concern was with rebutting the charges of anticommunist politicians

60 Johnson, "What is the Negro Doing for Himself?" *Liberator*, June 1918, 29-31.

61 Cooper, 168-9; Foley, 22.

and activists that black struggles for equality were motivated by radical ideologies. Here, Johnson made the argument black activists would make for much of the twentieth century, asking why, in the face of lynching, discrimination, and dispossession, one needed outside agitators to explain black protest. However, his defense of black struggle also contained a more interesting line of thought. Though dismissive of the idea that contemporary black struggles were motivated by radicalism, he also held that “there is no logical reason why the Negro should not be forced into the ranks of the radicals, and there is no doubt that the treatment they are getting will eventually force them there.” Though anticipating Alain Locke's later labeling of the Negro “a forced radical,” Johnson's argumentative aims are markedly different from Locke's desire to contain “Harlem's Quixotic radicalisms.”⁶² Though concerned to legitimate black struggles for equality by differentiating them from radicalism, he nonetheless leaves the door open for black radicalism as a legitimate political strategy. This interpretation is strengthened by Johnson's follow-up piece a month later. In that piece, which responded to a reader criticizing his treatment of radicalism as “a protest against radical thinking and action on the part of colored people.” To the contrary, “An intelligent radical group in the race is necessary to its progress.” The misinterpretation of his interlocutor appears here to have forced Johnson to stake out a more forthright position than he had originally desired. Nonetheless, however, his endorsement of “intelligent radicalism” stands in stark contrast to the ideals of Washingtonian conciliation he had once endorsed. At the same time,

62 Alain Locke, “The New Negro” in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992 [1925]), 11.

Johnson's qualifier - "intelligent" - left him room for maneuver if pressed.⁶³

As Johnson began appreciating the value of radicalism for the black struggle, he also changed his analysis of the best methods for waging that struggle. The prejudices of Washingtonian uplift politics disappeared from his writings, and were replaced by the advocacy of militant tactics, such as general strikes, that bore the imprint of a politics closer to those that inspired the Russian revolution. He first advocated such tactics in print in 1919, in an *Age* column on "Terrorism – How It Could be Met." Johnson noted that "[n]o matter how rich or well-educated a Negro may be, he has not the strength as an individual" to stand up to white supremacist terrorism. This repudiation of the value of achievement for racial progress led Johnson to argue for "a combination of forces on the part of the Negro." Through such organization, a threat against any in the black community could be met with a declaration that "not a meal will be cooked, not a garment will be washed, not a team will be hitched, not a brick or a piece of timber will be moved, not a nail will be driven by any Negro until justice is done." As Johnson recognized, "[t]hat would be a general strike." The advocacy of a general strike as a response to lynching illustrates the ways that the radical politics of the conjuncture reshaped Johnson's conceptualization of racial struggle. Though he never adopted the stance of other New Negro authors, who argued for an American Bolshevism to combat racism after the way the Soviet Union fought anti-Semitism, Johnson still drew his tactics for the struggle for equality from those being advocated by socialists and communists. Moreover, in

63 Johnson, "Radicalism and the Negro," *New York Age*, August 9, 1919, 4; Johnson, "Some More About Radicalism and the Negro," *New York Age*, September 6, 1919, 4.

repudiating individualism, he not only argued for the necessity of organization, but also located an agency for combating racism in the position of Negroes as workers. For Johnson, not only was the black struggle for equality a manifestation of the spirit that inspired the Russian revolution, but it would also advance through adopting the tactics that helped make the revolution.⁶⁴

In an NAACP address from 1925, Johnson reiterated the points he had argued for in the postwar years. He declared that "I speak about this power because I want you to carry this thought away with you; that, in fact, is the key of what I am trying to show you. Power, power, that can bring pressure in every legitimate and every righteous way...No change in the universe takes place without it." Bringing this perspective to bear on lynching, Johnson proposed a "very simple way" to eliminate the practice:

If in any southern community where a lynching was threatened or had taken place, black hands would not lay a single brick, would not drive a single nail, would not wash a single shirt, would not cook a single meal until the victim or the threatened victim was give due protection and the violators of the law and the leaders of the mob punished, lynchings would stop

Johnson's almost verbatim repetition of his argument from 1919 gives some indication of the importance these ideas held in his conceptualization of black struggle. In the same address, Johnson took direct aim at the prescriptions of Washingtonian politics, asking "Why should every Negro in the United States possess an independent income before it is wrong to deprive him of his common rights? That is not asked of any other group in the world. If we have to wait for

⁶⁴ Johnson, "Terrorism – How it Could be Met." *New York Age*, November 1, 1919, 4.

this, the whole thing is hopeless.”⁶⁵

As might be expected, Johnson's increased interest in the tactics of revolutionary politics was accompanied by an increased openness to revolutionary theory. While he never proclaimed himself a Marxist, Johnson's writings show a definite engagement with Marxist theory in the period of his interest in the Russian revolution. His “Emancipation Address” in 1920 illuminates the effect this engagement had on his analysis of the race question. After launching a harsh critique of Washington's self-help perspective (ironically enough, given his earlier praise for Washington in an Emancipation Day speech), Johnson turned to “a new school” of analysis. This school “declares that the Negro is only a part of the great economic problem of the world, that he is merely an element in the great class struggle.” Though Johnson is critical of this analysis, arguing that “when they claim that outside of economics there is no race problem...they undermine the strength of their arguments,” he also speaks positively of the strengths of “the new school.” He praises the “disciples” of the new school for opening “the Negro's eyes to fact which he has only recently begun to realize, the fact that the economic factor runs through his whole problem.” For Johnson, the pervasiveness of “the economic factor” has real implications for the shape of black struggle. The Negro needs to learn “the lesson that he is an element in the class struggle and that for success in that struggle he must ally himself with his own class.” Once more, Johnson is more forthright in private, employing the language of class struggle in a way he never would in the *Age*. As

⁶⁵ Johnson, “A New Power for the Solution of the Race Problem,” Address to the NAACP, June 28th, 1925. James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, Box 77, Folder 545.

elsewhere, Johnson adopts a pedagogical perspective that is, in some ways, reminiscent of the politics of uplift. Yet the goal of such pedagogy is no longer to prepare blacks for their ascent in American society, but rather to aid in its total remaking.⁶⁶

Johnson also appropriated Marxist theory to understand the forces resisting that remaking. In evaluating the anti-radical repression unleashed after the war, Johnson mused as to why “those who maintain the existing order...go mad and froth at the mouth” when confronted by radical change. Would it not be more sensible to “investigate it and try and try and find out what truth and justice it contained”? The answer, he argued, was that “the sensible line of conduct is not possible,” because of the social position of “those who maintain the existing order.” This group, in possession of “the wealth, the luxury, the leisure...are opposed to any change, right or wrong. They blindly fight all change, feeling that any change of any kind will affect their possessions.” Johnson fully realized his argument's provenance, noting that “This brings us up to the economic interpretation of history.”⁶⁷

Johnson's new appreciation of “the economic factor” led him to rethink a

66 Johnson, “Emancipation Address,” January, 1920 James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, Box 84, Folder 644. Additionally, the explicitly pedagogical perspective Johnson adopts here strengthens the argument made above that his writings on the revolution in the *Age* should be seen as part of a purposeful practice of educating his black readership in radical politics.

67 Johnson, “Crushing Out Radicalism,” *New York Age*, November 29th, 1919, 4. The “economic interpretation of history” was often used as a synonym for Marxism in early twentieth century America. As Brian Lloyd argues, this usage conflated economic determinist theories of history, such as that of Charles and Mary Beard, with actual Marxism. However, for our purposes here, this distinction is irrelevant. Whether Johnson understood the difference between historical materialism and progressive historiography, he was clearly advancing what he saw as an argument profoundly consonant with the Marxist revolution he was praising at the same time. See Brian Lloyd, *Left Out: Pragmatism, Exceptionalism, and the Poverty of American Marxism, 1890-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997), 83-91.

number of issues outside of the struggle for black equality. Where he had once dismissed the struggles of the populists for free silver as outside the interests of blacks, he now took a deep interest in questions of social inequality. As described above, even before the October revolution, Johnson took from the example of the soviets in Russia a critique of the limits of political democracy in the face of class exploitation. In another column, Johnson applied this analysis to the situation of the former bondpeople after the Civil War, arguing that citizenship and democracy mean nothing without control over society's productive resources. Beginning on a vaguely Washingtonian note, Johnson evokes the spectacle of "four million people set free, without a dollar, without a foot of land, without even clothes, without education and without experience. We had placed in our hands a piece of paper called the ballot, and we were told that we were citizens of the United States." Instead of sounding the familiar Washingtonian critique of the folly of seeking political freedom in such circumstances, however, Johnson instead concentrates on the boon such a people constituted for their former owners. The "employer class of the South" could now exploit Southern blacks even more viciously, since they no longer had any capital invested in their workers, and were no longer responsible for their welfare. Here, Johnson's analysis echoes Marx's famous description of the "dual freedom" under which proletarians labor. More importantly, however, Johnson used this analysis to endorse a more general redistributionist agenda, arguing that, just as the plantations should have been broken up and distributed among the slaves, the Russian revolution's distribution of land to the peasants demonstrated that the governments of Europe would have to follow the same policy. Johnson was

militant on this point, declaring that “Land for this purpose will be seized, if necessary.” As usual, Johnson shrouded the radicalism of his argument in dispassionate language, couching it as the simple analysis of established fact. Land redistribution would be embraced by other European governments because they “realize that they cannot have stable governments after this war unless they follow much the same policy.” Though Johnson, cautious as ever, did not explicitly call for the redistribution of wealth in the United States, his rendering of both history and current events clearly pointed in that direction.⁶⁸

In positing the question of redistribution as a key point in determining the postwar order, Johnson shifted the locus of the key political conflict away from the struggle between nations and on to the struggle between classes. He elaborated on this perspective two years later. In the course of a discussion of the Danish writer Georg Brandes, Johnson endorsed his view that the next struggle in Europe would be between “those who know no want and those who know want only.” For Brandes, “the social revolution is at hand. . . Capitalism, after a rule of a little more than a century, will soon abdicate in favor of the workers.”⁶⁹

Throughout the column, Johnson stuck closely to Brandes' words, primarily explicating the latter's views rather than giving his own. He justified this rhetorical stance with praise of Brandes' status as a writer, and noted that, as an observer, Brandes could give a better assessment of the world situation than diplomats or politicians, who were too close to the action to see it clearly. Johnson's ventriloquism here serves the same purpose as his doubly conscious

68 Johnson, “The Hour of Opportunity,” *New York Age*, October 18, 1917, 4.

69 Johnson, “George Brandes on the Future of Europe,” *New York Age*, July 26, 1919, 4.

rhetoric does elsewhere, giving his radical diagnosis of the world situation an ideological prophylactic to protect them from repression. However, his phrasings make clear that Johnson clearly endorses the sentiments he describes, as when he notes that “it was plain before the end of the war and it is plainer now that the greater conflict is not between nations and nationals; it is between classes even in the some nation.”⁷⁰

Interestingly Johnson also relates, without comment, Brandes raciological speculations on the conflict that would follow that between classes. In Brandes' account, the socialist civilization of Europe would soon be out-competed by China, Japan, and India. Then would follow “a war for the white man's right to leadership in civilization, a war with the colored races of the world.” Though Brandes' forecasting of a global race war was not out of place in the postwar conjuncture, his depiction of a socialist Europe standing against the colored races stands out. Other race theorists tended to place socialism in alliance with those who stood against Europe. As we have seen, however, elsewhere Johnson explicitly identified socialist Russia with a civilization opposed to that of imperialist Europe. Given Johnson's support for socialist movements throughout Europe, and his critique of European “civilization,” it seems unlikely that he endorsed Brandes' forecasting on this front. There are no moments where Johnson steps back and offers evidence in confirmation of Brandes' theory here, as there are in his relating of the theory that the new conflict was between classes. Nonetheless, his decision to relate these aspects of Brandes' theory is odd in the

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

context of his other writings.⁷¹

With a re-evaluation of the primary political conflicts shaping the world came a rethinking of the possible allies for black Americans in the struggle for equality. Earlier in his life, Johnson had been hostile to labor unions and white workers in general. Well-schooled in Washingtonian sociology, Johnson had seen “the best men of the South” as the Negro's natural allies, and the lower classes as the primary danger. The spectacle of working-class revolution, however, together with his newfound appreciation of the importance of “the economic factor” in the black struggle, led Johnson to look to white workers and radicals as a powerful potential ally.

His reconsideration of white workers was partially aided by workers themselves, as the postwar strike wave led to a brief efflorescence of interracial solidarity. The most famous manifestation of this solidarity occurred in Bogalusa, Louisiana, where three white unionists died protecting a black organizer from anti-union vigilantes. As Barbara Foley notes, “[t]he word *Bogalusa* would figure briefly as a metonymy for the better world that many envisioned.” Johnson counted himself as one of these many, writing a column in response to the attack entitled “The Obvious Thing to Do.” According to Johnson, Bogalusa gave “promise that the day will come when the white working men of the South will see and understand that their interests and the interests of the black working men of the South are identical.” Johnson predicted “some mighty changes” would be at hand once the white worker understood “that it is the plan of those who keep him out of what he is fighting for to do it by keeping him and the Negro

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

apart.” Johnson's analysis here obviously draws on the Marxist analysis of racism as a method for dividing workers in the struggle against capital. Equally noteworthy, however, is the rhetorical stance Johnson adopts in delivering this analysis. At the beginning of the column, he notes the story's “passing strange[ness],” and comments that the actions of the white workers were “based on such obviously common sense action that the real strangeness comes in thinking of it as strange at all.” By casting working class interracial solidarity as “The Obvious Thing to Do,” Johnson cast his radical conclusions on Bogalusa as nothing more than common sense. Of course, the air of obviousness Johnson sought to cultivate is belied by the fact that, a mere decade earlier, he had not considered such a strategy obvious, or even viable. Additionally, though Johnson was characteristically taciturn about what “mighty changes” Bogalusa portended, his language hearkens to his first evaluation of the Russian Revolution, “A Mighty Age,” in which he had forecasted the end of hereditary rule throughout Europe as a consequence of the revolution. In light of this and Johnson's other statements on the rising of submerged classes, it is not too much to suggest that the mighty changes he hoped to see included a total overturning of the principles governing Southern society. The man whom Mary Ovington had once derided as a “reactionary” on the labor question was sounding more like a Wobbly than a Washingtonian.⁷²

Responsibility for this shift in Johnson's outlook lies not only with events

72 Foley, 14; Johnson, “The Obvious Thing to Do,” *New York Age*, November 29, 1919, 4. For more on the incident in Bogalusa, see Stephen Norwood, “Bloody Bogalusa,” in *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present, Vol 5: The Black Worker from 1900 to 1919*, ed. Philp S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 483-489.

like Bogalusa, but also with the circulation of ideas inside the New Negro movement. A series of columns from late 1918 on the labor question illustrates this process in Johnson's evolution. In the first column, Johnson argues a familiar Washingtonian line on black labor, castigating black workers for their high turnover rates and declaring that "Colored workers have got to learn to stick to their job." A week later, he adopted a line of argument more congruent with the radical alignments he was forming, encouraging black waiters in New York to stop passively accepting scab work when white waiters struck, and instead to get organized. In this column, Johnson repeated the lines from his "What Will the Negro Get Out of the War" address about submerged classes needing to abandon their patience, highlighting the connection between the global upheaval and his perspective on black workers. Furthermore, though Johnson did not directly enjoin the black waiters to abandon scabbing, he counseled white workers that it was in their interest to accept the black waiters into their union, as such a move would drastically increase their bargaining power with their employer. Though Johnson did not directly argue for inter-racial working class unity as a political strategy, his column nonetheless marked a change in his thought in its acceptance of the necessity of black workers to organize, and his perception of a commonality of interest between black and white workers.⁷³

In response to this column, the New Negro writer George Frazier Miller, a socialist associated with the *Messenger*, wrote a letter arguing that the kind of interracial solidarity Johnson hoped to see was, in fact, a reality. Frazier reported

⁷³ Johnson, "Now Comes the Test," *New York Age*, November 23, 1918, 4; Johnson, "The Labor Question Again," *New York Age*, November 30, 1918, 4.

on his address to the waiters' union, where he told the white waiters “it is to the interest of the employing class, or the exploiters of labor, to create, or to maintain, a division in the ranks of labor.” Frazier advised the waiters to abandon all racial distinctions amongst themselves, and he reported that his arguments were received “[w]ith thunderous applause.”⁷⁴

Johnson responded to Frazier's letter the next week, praising its contents. He admitted that he “had doubts as to how [Johnson's advice about interracial unity] would strike the white workers.” Miller's letter “clear[ed] up the doubt on that point.” After reiterating his arguments about the necessity of organization, Johnson turned to a broader analysis of the black worker's place in the current moment. For Johnson, the key question was what was to be “the Negro's part in the coming reconstruction.” The problem was that most Negroes were ignorant of this reconstruction, while “the masses throughout the world are thinking of and planning . . . not political reconstruction, but economic reconstruction.” Here, Johnson's persistent use of the term “reconstruction” drew from a broader New Negro rhetorical field in which the radicalism of Black Reconstruction after the Civil War was used to imagine the postwar reconstruction. As Barbara Foley as shown, “reconstruction” was embraced as a descriptor of the postwar order by a host of labor militants, signifying the way the black struggle had become metonymic for the more general struggle for social emancipation. Johnson, while tracing his usage to the program of the British Labour Party, was certainly familiar with this usage. Moreover, his quick transition from discussion of racial

⁷⁴ George Frazier Miller, “Dr. Miller to the Striking Waiters,” *New York Age*, December 7, 1918, 4.

unity in a New York waiter's strike to a consideration of black workers' role in the struggle to "revolutionize the economic system" demonstrates the deep linkage these matters possessed in his mind. For Johnson, the connection between the two was obvious.⁷⁵

Frazier's argument, alongside events like Bogalusa, led Johnson to look more positively upon organized labor as a whole. In the postwar years, he came to view the American Federation of Labor as a valuable ally in the general struggle against reaction, and as a possible force for racial equality. He credited the AFL, for example, along with the NAACP, for helping to kill the Graham Sedition Bill. And he was effusive with praise for the AFL's decision at its 1920 convention to request the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks remove their "whites only" clause from their constitution. Johnson declared this request "[o]f greater importance than anything that has been done for the Negro in all the political conventions that have been held for the past forty years." It portended "a better day for labor in America and an absolute revolution in the matter of color prejudice." Though Johnson surely misjudged the consequences of the AFL's decision, even on the limited ground of union race policy, he was far from alone

75 Johnson, "More on the Labor Question," *New York Age*, December 14, 1918, 4; Foley, 14. Though Johnson's word choice here sounds radical, it is worth noting that it is not at all clear what vision of the economic reconstruction to come he embraced. On the one hand, he seems to recognize the limits of reformist strategies, noting that "better wages and better hours and better working conditions are only makeshifts." At the same time, his description of what would ensure "the secure betterment of their condition" is "making labor an equal asset with capital to be pooled in the partnership of production." Johnson goes on to praise Arthur Henderson, the British Labour Party politician, for his book "The Aims of Labour," which Johnson calls "the most truly democratic thing that has come out of the war." Johnson argues that if "all the intelligent colored ministers and public speakers" would read Henderson's book, the "present-day realities" would be more well-known amongst "the great mass of the race." In general, Johnson seems to have avoided committing to any single vision of social change, recommending Henderson's book after recommending Trotsky's, and going on to continue enthusiastically supporting the Bolsheviks after endorsing the vision of the Labour Party. Johnson, "More on the Labor Question."

in doing so, and his enthusiasm speaks to his deeper conviction that a revolution, of some kind, at least, was indeed on the horizon.⁷⁶

Johnson's belief in the imminence of revolution in the postwar years serves as a telling marker of the ideological distance he had traveled. Where once he held that the forms of oppression under which black Americans lived “will be made to fall only by time's decaying touch,” he now placed his race among the submerged classes rising up the world over. The imagery of crucibles melting down the old order and moulding a new one that recurs so frequently in his writings from this era reinforces the point, relocating the causal force of change from the impersonal progress of time to the product of human agency. Inspired by the Bolshevik example, Johnson became convinced that people could decisively change the course of their history, and extended this insight to his analysis of the struggle for black freedom. Analyzing the struggle in these terms meant more than simply asserting the potential of black struggle. For Johnson, it meant reading the history of that struggle through the lens of the revolutionary wave sweeping the globe. Bringing this history to bear on black history in the US completely reshaped his conceptualization of that history, submerging whatever lingering attachment to the politics of uplift remained in a tide of revolutionary optimism.

A New (Old) Democracy

⁷⁶ Johnson, “The Graham Sedition Bill,” *New York Age*, February 7th, 1920, 4; Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor & the Black Worker, 1619-1981* (New York: International Publishers, 1981), 154-158.

That optimism was not to last. As it became clear that the revolutionary efforts to shape the postwar order would meet the same fate as Reconstruction in the US, Johnson articulated his vision of black progress in terms less beholden to revolutionary movements, and more congruent with the liberal protest politics of the NAACP.

Johnson's move away from the radical politics he had embraced in the wake of the Russian revolution was the result of three processes. First, the consolidation of capitalism domestically and internationally during the early 1920s made the global revolution Johnson had foreseen seem a far remoter possibility. Second, in this context, Johnson's ongoing work with the NAACP seemed a more realistic political strategy. Third, the rise of the Harlem Renaissance served to displace radical political projects based on collective action in favor of a strategy based on the demonstration of aesthetic achievement.

From 1921 onwards, the revolutionary movements that, a mere two years earlier, seemed poised to sweep the old governments of Europe away were in retreat. Italy's *biennio rosso* had come and gone, the Hungarian Soviet Republic was no more, and though the Bolsheviks remained in power, the devastation left behind by the civil war was soon to become apparent. As we have seen, Johnson continued to defend and praise the revolution in these years. However, as it became less and less plausible to speak of a global rising of the submerged classes, Johnson ceased treating such an uprising as the strategic center of his politics.

At the same time, Johnson's work with the NAACP formed an alternative political center of gravity. Johnson had been tireless in his work on the Dyer anti-lynching bill from 1921-1923, spending, as he put it, "the greater part of my

time in Washington.” Despite Johnson and the Association's efforts, the bill ultimately failed to pass. The bill's failure, however, had not prevented the NAACP's campaign in favor of it from becoming the center of national black politics. From black communities across the country, donations came in to aid the NAACP's fight against lynching. Moreover, the campaign for the passage of the bill ultimately strengthened Johnson's faith in the efficacy of the democratic organs of the US state. The campaign, he told the NAACP, had “made the United States Congress a trumpet through which the facts of lynching were broadcast to the country.” In light of the NAACP's success on the propaganda front, along with the retreat of revolutionary movements, the concerns that had animated Johnson's earlier critiques of the limits of purely political democracy no longer seemed as pressing.⁷⁷

The Harlem Renaissance provided an additional alternative to the political project represented by the Russian Revolution. As a number of studies have made clear, the canonical New Negro of Alain Locke differed in key respects from the radical New Negro of 1919. Locke was, of course, perfectly forthright about this difference, dismissing “Harlem's quixotic radicalisms” contemptuously in favor of an embrace of America's democratic heritage. For Locke, black advance would be the result of “the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective.” Johnson agreed with this sentiment, writing to his assistant Walter White in 1923 that black progress in the arts “will not only mean a great deal to

⁷⁷ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 537; Johnson qtd. in Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 109.

the Negro . . . but will provide the easiest and most effective approach...to the race question.” Notably, Johnson also recommended this strategy on the grounds that it would offer “the least friction.” Johnson's emphasis on the ease of this approach, and the way it would avoid friction, hint at the way he had reconsidered his earlier analyses. Johnson's prior enthusiasm for the rising of oppressed had emphasized the conflict that would be necessary for the achievement of equality. Here, his eagerness to avoid conflict suggests that a diminished sense of possibility was at least one factor weighing in his strategic re-orientation.⁷⁸

An address Johnson gave at the Hampton Institute in 1923 indexes all of these changes at once. Entitled “The Larger Success,” it illustrates how Johnson's political outlook changed as the radicalism of the postwar years receded. Full of inspirational bromides for the graduating class at Hampton, the speech nonetheless touches on a number of themes Johnson had taken up earlier. Regarding the war years, Johnson asserts that the Great War was nothing but a repetition of “what nations have done over and over again since the beginning of recorded history, and their acts were followed by precisely the same results.” What he had once termed “a mighty age” Johnson now saw as the dreary cycle of history repeating itself. Crucially, all sense of a world undergoing a remaking (in which black Americans might play a crucial part), the dominant note in his earlier writings on the war, was gone. Where he had seen novelty and

⁷⁸ Locke, “The New Negro,” 11, 15; Qtd. In Sullivan, 131. On the political evolution of the New Negro, see Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature Between the Wars: A New Pandora's Box* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 30-47; Foley, 198-249.

opportunity, Johnson now saw recurrence.⁷⁹

Johnson's address also suggests that uplift politics had once more become an important element in his evaluation of the race. When he comes to directly discussing the race problem, Johnson asserts that "[t]he Negro must fit himself to the very best of his ability for all the rights and privileges of American citizenship." Elaborating, he explained that blacks must avoid the error of "believing that our status is due entirely to outside conditions." Johnson's notion of making the race fit for citizenship is reminiscent of his introduction of Booker T. Washington decades earlier, when he had argued that the race's status was due to its failure to produce great men. No longer was the black struggle conceived of as one element of a global rising of the oppressed; instead, Johnson now saw it as a remaking of the race as a people deserving of citizenship.⁸⁰

Importantly, however, Johnson did not simply return to his pre-1914 positions. Too much had changed, both in his own personal situation and in the world, for those strategies to be adequate to the situation he faced. The aesthetic strategy described above loomed large among the novel elements of Johnson's intellectual commitments, surfacing in the Hampton speech as well. Here, Johnson describes "the arts" as "the easiest approach to...some of the most vital phases of our problem. It is the path of least friction." He argues that art and literature stand as "[t]he final measure of the greatness of all peoples." Consequently, "nothing...will do more to change this mental attitude [of prejudice] and raise the status of the Negro than a demonstration by him of intellectual and

⁷⁹ Johnson, "The Larger Success," *Southern Workman* 52 no. 9 (September 1923): 427-36.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

esthetic parity through the production of literature and art.” For Johnson, the aesthetic strategy, having displaced radicalism, interracial struggle, and the other points around which he rallied during the postwar years, was now at the very center of his vision of racial progress.⁸¹

As the 1920s wore on, Johnson's ideological distance from his earlier radicalism increased. By the 1930s, he was writing polemics against the Communist Party, deploying familiar liberal arguments. “Communism and the Negro,” his most sustained commentary on radical politics from his later years, is in precisely this mode. In it, Johnson argues that Marxists offer no real solution to the race problem. Engaging in no small amount of caricature, Johnson condemns Marxists for assuming that if African Americans obtained equal access employment, the race problem would disappear. Capitalism wasn't behind racism, for from the employer's point of view a Black worker was as good as a white one. White workers were the primary cause of racism. Instead of staking their chances on revolution, which would only bring upon them “all the odiums attached to Communism,” African Americans should work towards “the struggle and the fight for all the common rights and privileges of American citizenship.” Leaving aside the fact that his image of Marxists more closely resembled the prewar Socialist Party's position on race than the CP's, Johnson's argument is interesting in the degree to which it reveals how far he had come. In his refusal to engage his opponent's actual arguments, Johnson betrayed an attitude exactly opposite of that he had developed in the immediate postwar years. Where once he had sought to highlight what African Americans had to gain by allying

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

themselves with radicalism, Johnson now viewed any such identification as positively dangerous. His substantive evaluation of political questions also changed. In his assigning blame to white workers for racism, Johnson directly contradicted the argument he put forward in “The Obvious Thing to Do.” There, inspired by the sacrifice in Bogalusa, Johnson had argued that racism hurt white and Black workers by keeping them from realizing their common interest in opposing capital. Now, similar to Marxists, white workers were to be viewed with suspicion.⁸²

Johnson's autobiography, published in 1933, similarly suppresses the memory of his earlier identifications with radicalism. In his pages recounting the years following World War I, Johnson gives no indication that he ever thought they were “the most serious in the history of the world.” The imagery of war and revolution as a crucible melting down old traditions, or of submerged classes rising, so appealing to him in the postwar years, is noticeably absent.

Yet shadows of Johnson's engagement with radicalism linger. In describing his joining the NAACP, Johnson described the *Crisis* as “the only radical publication in the country that was self-supporting.” Realizing that his description may raise some eyebrows, Johnson goes on to argue that he uses the word radical “in a relative sense.” After all, in parts of the country, “for example, darkest Mississippi,” it still was radical to insist that African Americans be granted the rights enumerated in the Magna Carta. Recalling the danger of his

82 Johnson, “Communism and the Negro” in *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson, Volume II*. Ed Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 180-88. Originally published as James Weldon Johnson, “Communism and the Negro,” *New York Herald Tribune Magazine*, July 21, 1935, 2, 25, 27. Interestingly, while Wilson includes this piece in the collection, none of Johnson's voluminous writings praising the Russian revolution were included.

own work for the NAACP in the South, Johnson reflected on the fact that “‘Negro radicalism’ that went no farther than this has times without number been met with violence and even death.” Such a sentence, as so many of Johnson’s, works in two directions. The scare quotes seem to call into question the concept of Negro radicalism, and look backwards to Johnson’s argument that African Americans are only asking for the rights whites granted themselves long ago. At the same time, the sentence’s subject is not “Negro radicalism,” but rather the qualified “Negro radicalism that went no further than this.” Such a qualification is only necessary if there was, in fact, a Negro radicalism that did go further (as many of Johnson’s contemporaries surely did.) Similarly, Johnson’s description of an NAACP organ as radical brings to mind his article for the *Liberator*, in which he would evaluate the Association as such for far different reasons. The text by which Johnson sought to repress the memory of radicalism simultaneously betrayed that history.⁸³

Conclusion

Johnson’s refusal to remember the history of his engagement with radicalism is one important reason that his interest in the Russian Revolution and subsequent shift to the left have gone largely unnoticed in scholarly commentary on his career. Yet this period in Johnson’s life, brief though it was, is significant for a number of reasons.

Most importantly, Johnson’s period of revolutionary sympathies

83 Johnson, *Along This Way*, 309-310.

demonstrates the tremendous power the revolution possessed in shaping postwar black intellectual life. As the history of his early life shows, Johnson was no radical at the beginning of World War I. He maintained close ties to the Washington machine through his employment at the *Age*, and even after joining the NAACP was on the more conservative edge of the organization's staff. Yet as the revolution developed, Johnson began leaving his old world-view behind, moving, piece by piece, towards an understanding of his moment as an age of revolution in which black Americans could play a vital role. Inspired by the Bolsheviks, Johnson began to denounce the rule of property, placing his hopes in the spread of revolution across Europe. If Johnson never came out and said he hoped for revolution in America is well, there is nonetheless reason to believe he thought it, but concealed it behind doubly-conscious rhetoric.

Johnson's enthusiasm for the revolution illustrates that examples of its influence were hardly confined to the usual suspects of New Negro radicalism. The next chapter examines the *Messenger*, one of the most prominent of the usual suspects. The history of its engagement with the revolution demonstrates that even in the case of those whose allegiance to Bolshevism would be obvious, the engagement would still produce unexpected results.

“Rank and Impudent Bolshevism” in Harlem: The *Messenger*, the Russian Revolution, and American Socialist Thought

In December of 1919, a small, Harlem-based magazine that had previously earned itself the distinction of “the most dangerous of all the Negro publications” began its latest issue in a most traditionally American way: with a Thanksgiving celebration. The editors of the *Messenger*, Harlem socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, wasted no time in subverting this ritual, announcing “we do not thank God for anything...Our deity is the toiling masses of the world.” Among the things the young revolutionists did give thanks for was “the Russian Revolution-the greatest achievement of the twentieth century.”¹

Not content to stop with the invocation of an event that positively terrified the American government, they went on to give thanks for “the German Revolution, the Austrian Revolution, the Hungarian Revolution, and the Bulgarian Revolution.” Lest they seem ungrateful for the class struggles which had not yet produced a revolution, the *Messenger*’s editors also gave nods to “the titanic strikes which are seeping and have been sweeping Great Britain, France, Italy, the United States, Japan, and in fact every country in the world.” This offering of thanks reveals the importance that Owen and Randolph placed on global revolution. Indeed, from its first issue in 1917 on

¹ Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 76; “Thanksgiving,” *Messenger*, November 1919, 4

through the early years of the 1920s, the *Messenger* maintained an abiding interest in the fate of the Russian revolution and the struggles it spawned.²

This orientation on Russia placed the *Messenger* firmly in the mainstream of New Negro thought. The editors of the magazine, however, were better placed than most of their contemporaries to appreciate the revolution's significance. Randolph and Owen had been members of the Socialist Party before the revolution broke out. The two had been responsible for the Harlem operations of socialist leader Morris Hillquit's mayoral campaign. When the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government in 1917, it looked to Randolph and Owen as if the cause for which they had been fighting had won a decisive victory.³

Indeed, unlike James Weldon Johnson, the socialists at the *Messenger* were never shy about proclaiming their fidelity to socialism and their opposition to American capitalism. As the Thanksgiving editorial indicates, they even took some pleasure from flaunting their disregard for the trappings of traditional Americanism. They were scathing about the hypocrisies of American racism, and they were no less acerbic towards those, like the NAACP, who they felt were timorous in their advocacy of justice. When a reader wrote in demanding that they “warn the Negroes of the United States to have nothing to do with Bolshevism,” one of the writers proclaimed proudly in response that

² Ibid.

³ Ernest Allen, Jr notes in his germinal analysis of the New Negro that “It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of these anti-colonial struggles, and especially the Russian revolution, on New Negro radicalization.” Ernest Allen, Jr., “The New Negro: Explorations in Identity and Social Consciousness, 1910-1922” in *1915: The Cultural Moment*, eds Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 54. Winston James has also briefly discussed the importance of the revolution in the thought of New Negro radicals in Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London:Verso, 1998), 164-168.

he, “a former United States Army Officer, [is] a Bolshevik.”⁴

Yet for all the panache with which the *Messenger* proclaimed its embrace of socialism, the journal's embrace of the Russian revolution was ultimately short-lived. By the mid-1920s, Randolph and Owen were arguing that the United States was not ready for any Bolshevik-style insurrection, and that even in Russia events had demonstrated that the time had not yet come for capitalism to exit the historical stage. In this, the *Messenger* followed what appears to be the most unlikely trajectory of any of the New Negro formations. From an embrace of radical socialism and defiant identification with the Bolsheviks, the editors moved to venomous denunciations of American communists, and hostility to any revolutionary strategy in the United States.⁵

This chapter will examine how the *Messenger* was able to move so swiftly between these political positions. It argues that Randolph and Owen's particular position within the debates occurring in American socialism is key to understanding their trajectory through the New Negro movement. While embracing a host of positions that placed them on the left of the party, from militant opposition to white supremacy to their support for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Randolph and Owen remained wedded to the political theory of the “center,” represented in New York and nationally by Morris Hillquit. When Randolph and Owen's debt to Hillquit's vision of socialism is made clear, their move from support for to hostility to the

4 Victor Daly, “A Most Interesting Controversy,” *Messenger*, October 1919, 30.

5 Other scholars have noted the *Messenger's* political shifts, but largely left their contours and causality unexplored. See Adam McKible, *The Space and Place of Modernism: The Russian Revolution, Little Magazines, and New York* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 39-58; Manning Marable, “A. Philip Randolph and the Foundations of Black American Socialism,” *Radical America* 14 no. 2 (1979): 7-29; Sally M. Miller, “The Socialist Party and the Negro, 1091-1920,” *The Journal of Negro History* 56 no. 3 (1971): 220-229.

Bolsheviks becomes comprehensible. By demonstrating how they read the revolution through a fundamentally social democratic lens, this chapter argues that Randolph and Owen were, in some ways, far less radical than their rhetoric often suggested. Their commitment to Hillquit's evolutionary socialism unearths one of the chief ironies of the New Negro engagement with the Russian revolution – those who moved into the postwar conjuncture most immersed in the milieu of American socialism proved least inclined to revise their politics in light of events in Russia.⁶

The Politics of American Socialism

The political and theoretical field into which Randolph and Owen entered when they joined the SP in 1916 was not a homogenous one. Like most of the parties of the Second International, the SP-USA contained different wings with vastly differing conceptions of both the movement and its objectives. In the US, the primary divisions were between a right wing, a left wing, and a center. As this chapter will argue that Randolph and Owen's politics are best understood as part of the center, the differences between these sections of the party are crucial to comprehending the specificity of those politics.⁷

6 Manning Marable similarly notes the essentially reformist character of Randolph's socialism, observing that “[l]ike many other socialists of the day, especially those influenced by the debates between Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky of German Social Democracy, Randolph believed that socialism was a series of economic reforms taking place between management and labor....Randolph's definition of socialism limited all of his subsequent work.” Unfortunately, other scholars have not followed up on Marable's perceptive reading of Randolph's political ideology. Marable, 12.

7 Many scholars have argued that the divisions between left and right in the party have been overstated, and that these factional divisions concealed a deeper unity in the party. James Weinstein, for example, argues that “[t]here were differences in tactical approaches among the several tendencies.” James Weinstein, *The Decline of American Socialism, 1912-1925*

The American right wing was associated primarily with Victor Berger of Milwaukee. Berger built a powerful socialist electoral machine by hewing closely to the program of progressive reformers, emphasizing good governance and anti-corruption. Theoretically, Berger distinguished himself by defending the revisionism developed by Eduard Bernstein in Germany. Breaking with Social Democratic tradition, Bernstein argued that socialism as a goal was the least important aspect of the movement. Instead, the parties of the Second International should focus on winning immediate reforms under capitalism. As he put it, “what is termed the final goal of socialism. . . is nothing to me, the movement is everything.” Berger domesticated Bernstein's arguments, reformulating them for an American context. Taking advantage of the progressive movement's growth, he argued that reforms such as municipal ownership were the most important aspect of socialist politics, as well as more likely to bring the party the votes of middle-class reformers.⁸

In terms of practical politics, the right wing, while supporting unions, often opposed strikes and other forms of disruptive struggle. Berger went so far as to campaign for the SP in Milwaukee as reliable guardians of capitalist

(New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 4. However, the scope of disagreement between left and right, which extended to questions such as the desirability of strikes, clearly stretched well beyond the realm of “tactics,” and into a fundamental disagreement about the means by which socialism could be achieved, and what that meant. Brian Lloyd argues more plausibly that the differences between left and right have obscured a common theoretical ground, mired in American pragmatism and strains of positivism, that left the entire movement ill-prepared to respond to either World War I or the Russian Revolution. Brian Lloyd, *Left Out: Pragmatism, Exceptionalism, and the Poverty of American Marxism, 1890-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997). For the purposes of this study, however, the strategic differences between left, right, and center are more helpful for positioning the *Messenger's* place in American socialism.

- 8 Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1968 [1952]), 117-118, 169; Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World Inc, 1955), 235; Bernstein qtd. in Henry Tudor, “Introduction” in Eduard Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, ed. Henry Tudor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), xxviii

interests, proudly declaring that “the Social-Democrats in this city have opposed almost every strike that has ever been declared here.” The right also maintained a steadfast dedication to the American Federation of Labor (AFL) as the legitimate expression of American working class interests in the economic arena. Though supportive of attempts to challenge Samuel Gompers for the AFL's leadership, the right refused to countenance attempts to organize workers outside of the federation. When the Industrial Workers of the World was formed in 1905 as an explicit challenge to the hegemony of the AFL, the right accused the new union of wrecking any chances for industrial unionism to take root in the federation.⁹

The right wing also contained some of the most virulent racists in the party. Berger's racism is notorious and well-known. Others on the right were equally wedded to white supremacy, however. John Spargo, another leader of the right, was supportive of political equality for African Americans, but advocated eugenics and was strongly opposed to miscegenation, which he held would result in the degeneration of the white race. In this, as more generally, the right wing of the SP was often difficult to distinguish from the mainstream of American progressive thought.¹⁰

The party's left stood opposed to the right on all of these questions. The

9 Kipnis, 169, 194. The right's refusal to countenance any break with the IWW renders Weinstein's claim that industrial unionism was not a dividing line between party factions unsustainable. While it is true that the right wing had bases in industrial unions in Milwaukee, and occasionally pushed the AFL to support the principle of industrial organization, they refused to support any measure which would advance industrial unionism under any auspices besides those of the AFL. In other words, support for the AFL outweighed industrial unionism. For the left, the equation was precisely the reverse. See Weinstein, 37-38.

10 Spargo's biographer argues that even his limited support for black political equality was “largely instrumental.” Markku Ruotsila, *John Spargo and American Socialism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 49.

key point of unity on the left was a support for class-struggle, industry-wide unionism. The left supported the IWW wholeheartedly, and was often fiercely critical not only of the AFL's leadership, but of the federation as a whole. It was contemptuous of middle-class reform movements, seeing them as little more than efforts on the part of the bourgeoisie to undermine the SP.

The left was also more united in its opposition to racism. Though Eugene Debs has become more famous for his pronouncement that "The Socialist Party has nothing special to offer the Negro," his record as an opponent of racism is an impressive one in the context of the SP. Big Bill Haywood and the IWW worked hard to organize black workers where they could, succeeding in some key areas. William English Walling organized the founding of the NAACP. The leading black socialist of the prewar years, Hubert H. Harrison, when still a member of the party, was a staunch supporter of Haywood and the left. This is not to deny that the SP left wing contained its fair share of racists. Indeed, figures like Jack London could rival Berger's commitment to white supremacy, and even leading supporters of the left such as Herman Titus capitulated to racism in the debate over immigration reform. Despite this, the clearest opponents of racial inequality were consistently found on the party's left.¹¹

The party's center vacillated between the positions of the left and the right. In the SP's early years, the party was governed by a coalition between the

11 Kipnis, 278. On Debs, see William P. Jones, "Nothing Special to Offer the Negro: Revisiting the Debsian View of the Negro Question," *International Labor and Working Class History* 74 no. 1 (2008): 212-24. On the IWW, see Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Lisa McGirr, "Black and White Longshoremen in the IWW: A history of the Philadelphia Marine Transport Union Local 8," *Labor History* 36 no. 3 (Summer 1995): 377-402.

center and the left. By the time of the founding of the IWW, however, leaders of the center such as Morris Hillquit and Adolph Germer recognized that the left's vocal support for strikes and even industrial sabotage hardly aided the party's electoral efforts, and moved towards a coalition with the right. This coalition would govern the SP until the expulsion of the left wing in 1919 rendered the governing coalition and the party identical.¹²

What ultimately distinguished the center was its combination of orthodox socialist principles with an unshakable commitment to the priority of electoral campaigns in SP strategy. While the right wing abandoned the former, the left tended to place little value on the latter.¹³ In contrast, the center saw itself as carrying out Second International orthodoxy in American conditions, winning the workers to voting for socialism.¹⁴

The center's most important representative was undoubtedly Morris Hillquit. A Latvian immigrant, Hillquit had risen from the ranks of New York City's garment workers to become a successful lawyer. His political history originated with Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Party, where Hillquit was introduced to socialism, but which he left in 1899 over its support for a trade union federation to rival the AFL. A few years later, Hillquit would lead those he had taken with him out of the SLP into a merger with Victor Berger and Eugene V. Debs' Social Democracy of America to create the Socialist Party.¹⁵

¹² On the end of the coalition between center and left, see Kipnis, Ch IX.

¹³ Indeed, Kipnis argues that the left's deprecation of political action explain the consistent fashion in which they were outmaneuvered in the SP itself. Kipnis, 187.

¹⁴ As Mark Pittenger notes, "Hillquit denied any affiliation with Bernstein." Mark Pittenger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 158.

¹⁵ Norma Fain Pratt, *Morris Hillquit: A Political History of An American Jewish Socialist* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1979), Chs 1-4.

Inside the party, Hillquit soon achieved recognition as a talented orator and a skilled organizer. Though not as prominent as figures like Eugene Debs and Kate Richards O'Hare, Hillquit came to play a crucial role in the party's early years as a moderator between the right and left wings. Initially working more closely with Debs and the left than Berger and the right, Hillquit shifted towards the right after the founding of the IWW in 1905. From then until the expulsion of the left in 1919, Hillquit's primary role in the party was as an opponent of the left.

As a theorist, Hillquit manifested a pronounced desire to "Americanize" socialist ideology.¹⁶ For Hillquit, this was a necessary precondition for socialism achieving the electoral success he desired for it. His writings accomplished this by largely abandoning the conceptual architecture of Marxism in favor of the bucolic ideological dwellings of the American middle class. For Hillquit, Marxism was merely Darwinism brought into the economic sphere, an expression of evolutionary forces that bespoke no great rupture with the course of American history. "Socialism," he reassured his readers, "has come to build, not to destroy." Though never foregoing the language of class struggle, Hillquit was careful to disabuse observers of any notion that the SP would be a party of unrest. Indeed, in his writings, class struggle was a rather bloodless affair, consisting primarily of workers joining unions and socialist politicians passing reform legislation.¹⁷

16 This had been a key issue in Hillquit's split with De Leon, whom he felt was keeping the SLP a party of immigrants. See Morris Hillquit, *Loose Leaves from a Busy Life* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1934), 44-7.

17 Morris Hillquit, *Socialism Summed Up* (New York: The HK Fly Company, 1913), 55. On Hillquit as Darwinist, see Lloyd, 165-175; Pittenger, 157-159; and Hillquit, *Socialism in Theory and Practice* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1909), 46-52. Though not as

Hillquit's description of the methods the SP would employ to further its aims serves as an index of his accommodation to American conditions. In *Socialism Summed Up*, a work of theory Randolph and Owen would repeatedly reference, Hillquit describes the SP as “a movement of education and propaganda.” This task is held to be superior to that of the “political and economic” organization of workers, itself reduced to merely convincing workers to join the SP and unions. The favored tactics of the SP left, “[t]he general strike” and “violent methods in labor struggles,” are abhorred as manifestations of an understandable but incorrect impatience. For Hillquit, “a country can be educated, led and transformed into socialism,” but not pushed by struggle.¹⁸

This conception of socialist strategy was itself premised upon a view of the state that profoundly informed all of Hillquit's politics, and would also play a crucial role in how Randolph and Owen would read the Russian Revolution. While classical Marxist theory had insisted that the state was an expression of class antagonisms, destined to wither away after a successful socialist revolution, Hillquit held that the institutions of the modern state had a productive role to play in any future society. Pointing to the success of socialist parties in winning reforms, Hillquit argued that “the state has acquired a new significance as an instrument of social and economic reform.” This new significance indicated an “adaptability and vitality” not recognized in the canonical socialist texts. Because of this adaptability, Hillquit argued that the state institutions of American capitalist society could easily serve as the foundation of a socialist society. Hillquit was so committed to minimizing the

virulent a racist as Berger, Hillquit's evolutionism did lead him to outbursts against the “lower” races in the course of various SP debates. See Pittenger, 175-176.

¹⁸ Hillquit, *Socialism Summed Up*, 44-58.

extent to which a transition to socialism would necessitate any sort of rupture that he expressed agnosticism on the question of whether the transition has already begun, without the SP even getting elected.¹⁹ From this perspective, the transition to socialism was of such mundane stuff that its beginning could even pass unnoticed.²⁰

When the Russian revolution broke out, Hillquit first attempted to claim it as a confirmation of his perspective. The manifest ways in which the course of the October revolution and the conduct of the Bolsheviks departed from his schema were dismissed as responses to local conditions, which changed nothing about his prescription for American socialists. Even before October, Hillquit was anxious to contain the insurrectionary energies of the revolution, arguing that no Russian socialists (aside from “a small group of extremists”) were for anything so radical as unilaterally pulling out of World War I. When reality refused to conform to Hillquit's pronouncements, and the Bolsheviks led an insurrection with the slogans of “Peace, land, and bread,” he quietly abandoned his earlier attempts to marginalize the Bolsheviks and praised the new Soviet government as an exemplar of the inevitable march towards socialism. As the differences between Bolshevik strategy and what Hillquit advocated for the United States became impossible to paper over, the SP leader shifted gears once more, launching a quarantine operation to render every aspect of the Bolshevik program a mere Russian peculiarity. Throughout *From*

19 As he put it, “it may well be said that we are in the midst, or at any rate at the beginning, of the socialist 'transitional state.'” *Socialism in Theory and Practice*, 104.

20 Hillquit, *Socialism in Theory and Practice*, 97-98. Later, Hillquit would go even further, suggesting that the capitalist state itself was the germ of socialism, and all Socialists had to do was nurture it. See Hillquit, “The Story of the Egg,” *Milwaukee Leader*, November 28, 1919, 12.

Marx to Lenin, his polemic against the Bolsheviks, Hillquit would continuously assert that aspects of the revolution such as soviets were quirks of Russian history. In this way, his evolutionary perspective on socialist strategy obtained insulation from the vicissitudes of the first successful socialist revolution.²¹

This conception of the nature of the transition to socialism would do important theoretical work for Randolph and Owen, licensing their considerable enthusiasm for the revolution, while occluding its most salient features from them. The crucial difference between attaining state power through the existing state machinery, and seizing it through the creation of alternative institutions of governance, was, as we shall see, consistently elided in their discussions of the revolution. This ambiguity shielded Randolph and Owen from being forced to reconsider their views in light of the experience of revolution. By the time the differences became too obvious to ignore, the devastation wrought on Russia by counterrevolutionary war and the failure of socialist revolution elsewhere made the choice of perspectives a simple one. Randolph stuck with what was familiar (Owen had left New York and socialism behind a few years earlier), and maintained his fidelity to Hillquit's much-diminished SP.

Randolph and Owen's Political Formation

Neither Randolph or Owen was a political neophyte when he encountered the Socialist Party. Randolph came out of the political traditions

²¹ Hillquit, "The Provisional Government of Russia and Separate Peace: As Viewed by Socialists," *New York Call Magazine*, May 13, 1917, 9; Hillquit, *From Marx to Lenin* (New York: The Hanford Press, 1921).

of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which emphasized race pride, opposition to disenfranchisement, and a certain commitment to the politics of respectability. Owen, about whom far less is known, appears to have had an intellectual posture of an almost completely opposed sort. Cynical and sarcastic, Owen was influenced by the evolutionary sociology of Lester Ward, an American academic who attempted to apply Darwin's theories of evolution to human society in a manner more amenable to reform-minded progressivism than the *laissez-faire* of Herbert Spencer.²²

Both of these intellectual backgrounds would continue to make themselves felt, to greater or lesser degrees, while Randolph and Owen worked on the *Messenger*. Owen would continue to recommend Ward's work to the magazine's readers, and Ward's vision of society as driven by evolutionary processes was often called upon to support arguments for the inevitable triumph of socialism over capitalism. Ironically, despite Ward's opposition to Marxism, these references put Owen firmly in the mainstream of American socialist thought, which had its own deep commitments to evolutionary models of social change. This evolutionism would assert itself more strongly as the *Messenger* came to reject the Bolshevik model of a revolutionary rupture with capitalism.²³

Randolph's early political formation in the AME would find more attenuated expression in the *Messenger*. Influenced by his father, James

22 Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1972), 74-75. On Ward, see Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955 [1944]), Ch. 4.

23 The place of these models in American Socialist thought is discussed in Pittenger; Lloyd, *Left Out*; and Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 87-89.

Randolph, who served as an AME pastor during his childhood, young Asa Randolph would grow up deeply committed to racial pride and black advancement. Both of these would be visible in the magazine, primarily through its unyielding opposition to white supremacy, though generally not in Christian garb.²⁴

Both young men found themselves in New York in early 1910s, eager to take advantage of what the city had to offer. Owen had enrolled at Columbia, after studying at Howard, to work on a sociology degree. Randolph took classes at the City College of New York, where he first became drawn in to radical politics. At City College, a vibrant radical subculture existed, with students eager to express solidarity with the leftist heroes of the day – figures like Big Bill Haywood, Eugene Debs, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. After reading Marx for some coursework, Randolph became a convinced socialist.²⁵

Harlem's public political culture was another important factor in Randolph and Owen's political formation. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Harlem boasted a bustling scene of political street-corner speakers, who would ascend stepladders to argue their chosen positions before passersby. Among these, the foremost was Hubert Harrison. Later described by Randolph as “the father of Harlem radicalism,” Harrison was a legendary figure in Harlem, renowned for his lectures on subjects from biology to economics. He became something of a mentor to Owen and Randolph, instructing them in the art of public lecture and praising and publicizing their writings. Though

²⁴ Anderson, 34-43; and Cornelius Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 24-44. As Manning Marable notes, “[t]he language of the Old Testament would inform many of his speeches, as he deliberately used religious principles of brotherhood and humanism in organizing black workers.” Marable, 12.

²⁵ Anderson, 61-64; Bynum, 64.

Harrison would leave the Socialist Party by the time Randolph and Owen joined it, he remained friendly with them until he joined Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, and became a vehement critic of their alleged "class-first" socialism.²⁶

Randolph and Owen's path to prominence in Harlem's political culture began in early 1917. William White, president of the Headwaiters and Sidewaiters Society of Greater New York, was looking to start a magazine for his union, and recruited the pair to edit the new publication. Crucially, White offered them an office out of which to edit the journal, which they called the *Hotel Messenger*, and in which they could conduct their own political activities. Here, they established a new space for black radical politics, receiving visits from guests like future black communists Cyril Briggs and Lovett Fort-Whiteman, and the Jamaican nationalist and socialist W.A. Domingo.²⁷

Their tenure at the *Hotel Messenger*, however, was cut short after they exposed a scandal involving the union. The headwaiters were engaging in a series of operations that exploited the side waiters, including forcing them to buy their uniforms from companies giving the headwaiters kickbacks, and coercing the sidewaiters into gambling away their wages. When Randolph and

26 Unfortunately, Harrison's later enmity towards Randolph and Owen lead his biographer, Jeffrey Perry, to paint a misleading picture of the *Messenger's* editors. He repeats uncritically, for example, Harrison's later assertion that Randolph and Owen only joined the Socialist Party in late 1917 after failing to find work with the Republican Party or Tammany Hall. This seems highly unlikely, given that Randolph and Owen had joined the SP in 1916, and throughout 1917, as editors of the *Hotel Messenger*, were associating with prominent black radicals such as Cyril Briggs and Lovett Fort-Whiteman, who were hardly the sort to approve of political mercenaries. For Perry's repetition of Harrison's claims, see Jeffrey Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 268. For a description of the *Hotel Messenger* milieu, see Anderson, 79.

27 Anderson, 78-79.

Owen exposed these activities in the *Hotel Messenger*, White fired them.²⁸

The two wasted no time in setting up the *Messenger* as an independent publication. The first issue was launched in November 1917. Though the first few issues got off to a rocky start, with whole seasons frequently passing between issues in the early years, the journal soon attained considerable prominence and a substantial readership. Circulation in the immediate postwar years reached a peak of about 26,000, though in the 1920s it would later hover around about 5,000. However, as scholars of the black press have often noted, publications of the black counter-public often have a readership that extends beyond their direct customers. In a study in the 1920s, Frederick G Detweiler estimated that hand-to-hand distribution of the black press was about five times as high as the number of subscribers. Among black magazines, only the *Crisis* had a greater circulation.²⁹

Though the *Messenger* has often been dismissed, in its own time and by later historians, as a project of an essentially white party, the evidence suggests that the journal found a substantial readership in black communities.³⁰

Dealers sold “thousands” of copies in cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Atlanta with large black populations. In Philadelphia, the Marine Transport Industrial Workers Union (an IWW union), which had a membership that was 60% black, raised \$1,200 for the journal and bought 3,600 copies for its membership. The

28 Theodore Kornweibel, Jr. *No Crystal Stair: Black Life and the Messenger, 1917-1928* (Wesport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), 32. Anderson, 79-80.

29 Frederick G. Detweiler, *The Negro Press in the United States* (College Park: McGrath Publishing Company, 1968 [1922]), 11; Qtd. in Perry, 304; Kornweibel, 54-55.

30 Wilson Record, for instance, pronounced their influence “extremely limited - ...and greatly overdrawn by those historians who all too frequently judge the importance of a political actor by the volume and ready accessibility of his writings.” Wilson Record, *Race and Radicalism: The NAACP and the Communist Party in Conflict*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), 27.

magazine even found circulation among the black prisoners in Ft. Leavenworth, Texas, who awaited trial for the infamous 1917 Houston uprising. While, as George Hutchinson and others have noted, the *Messenger* was a part of the flourishing of interracial institutions during the Harlem Renaissance, the journal spoke clearly and purposefully to the concerns of black life in the postwar years, and built a readership accordingly.³¹

The *Messenger* and the Socialist Party

After joining the SP, Randolph and Owen's first major political involvement was in Morris Hillquit's mayoral campaign. The party hired Randolph and Owen as organizers in a canny bid for Harlem's vote, which was ignored by the Democrats and taken for granted by the Republicans. Randolph and Owen promoted the campaign in the *Messenger*, and organized rallies in Harlem in support of Hillquit. When Teddy Roosevelt came to town to support a fusion candidate, the *Messenger* editors arranged for supporters of Hillquit to heckle the former president and then stage a walk-out, leaving the pro-Republican *New York Age* sputtering with outrage at the young socialists'

³¹ Winston James, "Being Black and Red in Jim Crow America," in *Time Longer than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850-1950*, ed. Charles M. Payne and Adam Green (New York: NYU Press, 2003), 371; Kornweibel, 54-55. Regarding the demographics of the journal's readership, there are conflicting reports. Jervis Anderson claims that Chandler Owen once admitted that "only one-third of the magazine's readership was black, the rest made up of white liberals and radicals," Anderson, 146. The source of this claim is, however, unclear. Theodore Kornweibel claims that "[t]he editors estimated in 1921 that readership was approximately two-thirds black and one-third white." Given the effort Randolph and Owen put into getting sales agents into black neighborhoods, and the circulation we know the journal achieved in working-class black communities, the latter seems more likely. Kornweibel, 54.

temerity.³²

Randolph and Owen's work for Hillquit's candidacy in 1917 was only one part of a much larger relationship with the Socialist leader. In many ways, Hillquit became the most influential figure in American socialism for Randolph and Owen. Though Randolph would later count Eugene Debs as one of the most important influences in his life, he would also later compare Debs unfavorably to Hillquit, whom he characterized as “a sophisticated and doctrinaire” intellectual. Besides Debs, no figure in the SP received anything like the attention Hillquit did in the *Messenger*. After his 1917 mayoral campaign, Randolph and Owen confidently pronounced Hillquit “[t]he most talked about man in America” (a slight exaggeration, perhaps). Significantly, they praised him for being “[c]ool, deliberate, and constructive.” His introductory book, *Socialism Summed Up*, was often quoted as a definitive explication of socialist theory – indeed, Hillquit's authority was invoked more often than that of Marx himself. This relationship would find theoretical expression in numerous ways throughout the *Messenger's* existence.³³

Direct discussions of SP factional politics were exceedingly rare in the pages of the *Messenger*, and only one reference was made to the schism that developed in 1919. In an article on “The Left and Right Wings Interpreted,” the writer (almost certainly Owen), dismisses most of the planks of the Left Wing platform put forward in 1917 as “amateur enthusiasm. . . not keeping pace with the scientific method.” Unpublished sources also suggest criticisms of the left.

³² Anderson, 94.

³³ Anderson, 76; “Morris Hillquit,” *Messenger*, January 1918, 31. For further praise of Hillquit, see “The Passing of the Republican and Democratic Parties,” *Messenger*, April–May 1920, 7; “Prof Harry H. Jones – The Crisis in Negro Leadership,” *Messenger*, April–May 1920, 15.

In a pamphlet circulated internally in the party in 1919, *Messenger* writer W.A. Domingo made an extended case for turning attention to black workers, in the process evaluating the left and right wing platforms. Domingo's goal was to show how both platforms necessitated a greater focus on blacks in order to be successful, but his arguments reveal broader political allegiances. Domingo asserts that the victory of the right will mean the party “concentrates its efforts upon vote getting in the North, flirts with the white South and ignores Negroes except in Northern urban centers where their votes are needed to elect a municipal official.” The left comes in for somewhat sharper criticism, as Domingo castigates the faction as it “adheres to a strictly theoretical position and shapes party propaganda on the purely theoretical syllogism, viz., the negro is a worker, hence when mass action is galvanized into mass movement, he will be swept along with the rest of his class.” Domingo was clearly skeptical of the abstraction he saw in the left's platform. His emphasis on its “purely theoretical” character dovetails with Owen's criticism that the platform was “unscientific,” particularly in the context of the empiricist epistemologies dominant in American socialism, indicating a commonly-held, or at least overlapping, position. Moreover, his criticisms of both left and right are strongly suggestive of an allegiance to the center, of which Hillquit was the most prominent representative. Though direct evidence on the *Messenger's* factional allegiances is rare, the evidence that does exist points to the center.³⁴

34 “The Left and Right Wing Interpreted,” *Messenger*, May-June 1919, 21; W.A. Domingo, “Socialism Imperilled, or the Negro – A Potential Menace to American Radicalism” in *Revolutionary Radicalism: Its History, Purpose and Tactics with an Exposition and Discussion of the Steps Being Taken and Required to Curb It* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1920), 1489-1511. During the same period that Domingo's pamphlet was circulating, the *Messenger* would publish an article signed by Randolph and Owen entitled “The Negro – A

Randolph and Owen's commitment to the SP center, as theorized by Hillquit, explains a number of otherwise puzzling aspects of their politics. For example, the *Messenger's* vitriolic criticism of the AFL (and support for the IWW) would have seemed to make them natural supporters of the party's left wing. Indeed, Randolph and Owen even went so far as to declare that the breakup of the AFL would be "of benefit to the labor movement. . . It cannot be reformed." Given the AFL's endorsement of segregation and worse in the union movement, this hostility to the federation is unsurprising, as is their support for the racially egalitarian IWW. Hubert Harrison had even quit the party in part as a result of the attempts of Hillquit and others to suppress advocates of industrial unionism. Despite all of this, however, Randolph and Owen never seemed inclined to support the left wing.³⁵

Even stranger, the *Messenger* never voiced any criticism of the party's center or right wing, which often embraced openly racist positions. Victor Berger went so far as to justify lynching, arguing that only socialism itself can "provide the conditions under which the hunger maniacs, kleptomaniacs, and sexual maniacs and all other offensive and lynchable human degenerates will cease to be begotten or produced."³⁶ Kate Richards O'Hare, the party's most popular speaker after Debs himself, and a supporter of the center, wrote a pamphlet entitled "Nigger Equality."³⁷ In it, she argued, against Southerners

Menace to Radicalism?" making very similar arguments to Domingo's. This overlap strongly suggests that Randolph and Owen were aware of Domingo's pamphlet and in agreement with the arguments presented therein. Kornweibel similarly notes that "it is clear that Randolph and Owen had no intention of supporting the left wing." Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair*, 223.

35 "Break Up the A.F. of L.," *Messenger*, May-June 1919, 7. For Harrison's time in the SP, see Perry, 146-219.

36 Later, Berger would reverse himself, and sponsor anti-lynching legislation in congress.

37 Though O'Hare herself would later claim that "A study of the records of the S.P. since 1900 will show that I was always 'regular' and 'right-wing,'" her refusal to indulge in Bernsteinian

who accused the SP of promoting social equality, that capitalism itself was forcing “Nigger Equality” on the South, where “the white daughters of white voters drag the cotton sacks down the cotton row next to 'nigger bucks.’”

Randolph and Owen simply ignored (or were ignorant of) O'Hare's racism, praising her for “never let[ting] race or color swerve her from her duty.”

Despite the bracing attacks it frequently launched on white supremacy in other areas of society, the *Messenger* remained strangely silent on racism in the party itself.³⁸

The *Messenger's* reticence to endorse the left, despite the clear ideological convergences around race and industrial unionism, cannot be explained, as some have claimed, as the journal “turn[ing] a blind eye to differences within the party.” Randolph and Owen were, after all, willing enough to criticize what they saw as the “unsound” platform of the left in 1919. A more reasonable explanation is their fundamental agreement with the position of the center, as given theoretical voice by Hillquit. While they clearly disagreed with Hillquit's position on the AFL, they maintained a deeper allegiance to his vision of evolutionary socialism (though without the racist cast those arguments often acquired in the hands of Hillquit and his supporters).

revisionism and her emphasis on class struggle place her more properly in the center. See Neil K. Basen, “Kate Richards O'Hare: The 'First Lady' of American Socialism, 1900-1917.” *Labor History* 21 no. 2 (1980), 177. However, it is worth noting that she was at least friendly enough with the Left to win election as an international delegate in the party elections of the first half of 1919, which the Left dominated. See Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 157.

38 Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1977), 126; Kate Richards O'Hare, “Nigger Equality,” in Kate Richards O'Hare: *Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Sally M. Miller (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 46-48; *Messenger*, “Kate Richards O'Hare,” May-June 1919, 10. As Barbara Foley notes, O'Hare's “miscegenationist fantasies...suggest an imagination not far removed from that informing Thomas Dixon's *Leopard's Spots* or *Clansmen*.” Foley, 82.

Like Owen, Hillquit was influenced by Lester Ward's evolutionary sociology, deploying his historicist arguments to justify both his call for certain revisions of Marxism and his faith that all reforms tended towards socialism. Hillquit's thought also appealed to Randolph's pre-socialist intellectual tendencies, containing a significant ethical register that did not shy away from Christian rhetoric. Moreover, Hillquit was the clear leader of the party in New York, the guiding force behind a political organization tens of thousands strong. When Randolph and Owen joined the SP, and took as their own the project of building a base for it in Harlem, it is unsurprising that they would look to Hillquit as a guide.³⁹

Randolph and Owen would ultimately read the Russian revolution through a theoretical lens provided by Hillquit. From this perspective, the Russian revolution could initially be celebrated as one step in the evolution of world socialism. However, when it became clear that the means by which this step were taken differed fundamentally from the course envisioned by the SP center, things became more complicated. The revolutionary strategy of the Bolsheviks carried no appeal to someone like Hillquit, for whom such a course promised only disastrously low numbers at the polls. As the cleavages between what was necessary for the Bolsheviks' victory and what the SP center would countenance became clearer, Randolph and Owen's enthusiasm for the revolution steadily waned. By 1921, Hillquit had launched a theoretical quarantine operation, determined to cast the Bolshevik's theoretical innovations as nothing more than Russian peculiarities, unfit for deployment

³⁹ Bynum, 70. On Hillquit and Ward, see Lloyd, 168; and Hillquit, *Socialism in Theory and Practice*, 21, 44, 52.

in the United States. Though Randolph and Owen continued to praise the Soviet state for years after Hillquit began making this argument, the substance of his argument found expression in their writings quite quickly. As Hillquit had argued, the techniques which had brought the Bolsheviks to power were inapplicable in the United States. Furthermore, once the American Communist Party managed to emerge from its crisis-ridden early years to challenge the SP for hegemony within the workers movement, the question of the incommensurability of the Bolshevik strategy with that of the SP became impossible to ignore. Though Hillquit's arguments allowed Randolph and Owen to ignore, for a time, the gap between the actuality of the Russian revolution and their interpretation of it, they simultaneously guaranteed that, when the choice had to be made, the *Messenger* editors would remain with the SP. It is this theoretical allegiance which ultimately explains the rapidity with which the *Messenger* was able to move from strident Bolshevism to anti-Communism in the course of a few years.

The Messenger and the Russian Revolution

The *Messenger's* first issue testified to the place Russia held in Randolph and Owen's political imagination, as well as the underdetermined nature of their support for the revolution. Amidst a number of articles on aspects of the international situation, from calls for Irish independence to satirical jabs at US anti-German hysteria, the issue contained two pieces concerning the situation in Russia. The first was a celebration of the defeat of the attempted coup led by

General Kornilov against the Provisional Government in August of 1917.⁴⁰

Here, Randolph and Owen took the opportunity to thumb their noses at the US bourgeoisie, whose support for the failed putsch they mocked. The second article was a brief introduction to Aleksander Kerensky, the prime minister of the Provisional Government whom the Bolsheviks had deposed in October (after the issue had gone to print).⁴¹ The article praised Kerensky for his “firm hand” that “stayed the overthrow” of the revolutionary government. It concluded in exhortation - “Long live Kerenski! Long live Revolutionary Russia! Long live socialism!”⁴²

Despite these rousing phrases, however, Randolph and Owen's gloss on Kerensky reveals, even at this early stage, the fundamental assumptions that would structure their interpretation of the revolution. In describing the state Kerensky presided over as a “socialistic government,” the editorial presupposes that what determines the nature of a state is the political ideology of those in command of it. In this way, the structural mechanisms which ensure that the state acts in the interests of capital are elided, and the transition to socialism reduced to socialist personnel taking over the state.⁴³ This interpretation of the state is clearly much the same as that Hillquit argues for in *Socialism Summed Up*. What it meant for Randolph and Owen was that the differences between Kerensky and the Bolsheviks were largely collapsed. By reading the

⁴⁰ The provisional government was the government formed after the overthrow of the czar but before the Bolshevik victory in October. It was led by a group of moderate socialists who were, among other things, dedicated to continuing Russia's participation in World War I.

⁴¹ The October revolution took place on November 7th, 1917, but the Russian empire still used the Julian calendar at the time, and so the name has stuck.

⁴² “Kerenski,” *Messenger*, November 1917, 32.

⁴³ The best short overviews of these mechanisms are Fred Block, “The Ruling Class Does Not Rule,” *Socialist Revolution* 33 (1977): 6-28; and Claus Offe, “The Capitalist State and the Problem of Policy Formation,” in *Stress and Contradiction in Modern Capitalism: Public Policy and the Theory of the State*, ed. Leon Lindberg (Lexington: DC Heath, 1975), 125-44.

provisional government as a socialist state, Randolph and Owen laid the groundwork for an interpretation of the Bolsheviks that emphasized merely their possession of state power, and not how they came to hold it, or over what kind of state they presided. From this interpretation, no strategic conclusions germane to socialists in the United States could be drawn, and Hillquit's educative program was made immune to revision.

When the Bolsheviks did take power, Randolph and Owen were immediately supportive. The *Messenger* praised them as “extreme radicals – not in the sense of being unreasonably extreme in their demands, but in the sense of being unwilling to take a half loaf when they are entitled to a whole loaf.” Randolph and Owen were also keen to defend Lenin and Trotsky against the rumors circulating throughout the American press alleging that the Bolsheviks were German agents. In doing so, they not only rebutted a slander on the revolution, but also helped create the intellectual space for their strategy of using the revolution to advance their own political project in the United States. After all, if American workers identified the Bolsheviks as German agents, the revolution was unlikely to be of much use in convincing them that socialism could (or should) be on the horizons of American politics. The closing of their editorial hinted at this internationalist perspective, announcing that the same questions that were being asked in Russia were now being taken up by “the Bolsheviks of all countries.” It would not have been unreasonable for readers to conclude that Randolph and Owen counted themselves among them.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ “The Bolsheviks,” *Messenger*, January 1918, 7-8.

Yet even as Randolph and Owen were suggesting that they could be considered American Bolsheviks, they were also revealing the limits of their understanding of what that entailed. They never acknowledged, for example, that the Bolsheviks had, in fact, overthrown the man praised in their previous issue as the representative of revolutionary socialism. Similarly, in their discussions of Bolshevik war policy, they echoed Hillquit's arguments about Russian revolutionaries wanting a general peace, never acknowledging that the Bolsheviks did, in fact, sign a separate peace with Germany in the treaty of Brest-Litovsk.. In their editorial on the subject, they informed their readers that “[t]he Russian people want a general, and not a separate peace. Lenin [sic] and Trotsky are working for this result.” As we have seen, after the February revolution, Hillquit was eager to bolster the respectability of the revolution by assuring his readers that only “a small group of extremists” backed such radical measures as a separate peace. When the Bolsheviks signed a separate peace with Germany in March of 1918, Hillquit and his allies faced the choice of how to bridge the gap between their description of the aspirations of the Russian working class, and what the new representatives of the class did. In the case of the *Messenger*, they ignored their earlier reassurances of Bolshevik desires for a separate peace, never acknowledging the shift that had taken place. In doing so, Randolph and Owen established the lines along which their interpretations would persistently run. Those aspects of the revolution which could not be mobilized to advance the political strategy of electoral socialism in the United States would simply be ignored.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Theodore Kornweibel attributes the *Messenger's* cautious approach to antiwar

To argue this is not to adopt a cynical interpretation of Randolph and Owen's engagement with Russia. Rather, it is to argue that their theoretical orientation, which all evidence suggests that they held in good faith, constrained and colored their interpretation of the revolution in crucial ways, determining those aspects of it from which they would learn, and those from which they would not.

Indeed, the record of the *Messenger* suggests that, far from cynically picking those moments of the revolutionary process most useful to them, Randolph and Owen were profoundly enthusiastic about the revolution from its first days. This enthusiasm constitutes the key way in which the revolution transformed Randolph and Owen's approach to politics. The example of the Bolsheviks coming to power in one of the great empires of Europe licensed a tremendous excitement over the prospects of socialists coming to power in other countries as well. As the Thanksgiving editorial reveals, Randolph and Owen fully expected the revolutionary wave to topple capitalism across Europe, and hopefully in the US as well.

This revolutionary optimism was grounded in a historical vision which saw the Russian revolution as the successor to the French and American revolutions, the latest stage in the evolution of democracy. For Randolph and Owen, Russia's place in this sequence served as a rebuke to those predicting the revolution's fall, who were compared to "the Tories of England" after the American revolution or "the Bourbons of France." Bolshevism's status as the next step in the march of democracy assured its eventual triumph. Indeed,

propaganda stemmed from a cagey pragmatism in the face of governmental repression. This editorial, however, suggests that their caution was much more deeply rooted in their political ideology. See Kornweibel, 21.

democracy formed the keyword in the *Messenger's* presentation of the revolution. Russia was regularly invoked as the “most democratic government,” and its enemies linked to aristocratic reaction. While this line of argument had the advantage of providing a firm foundation for the belief that socialism in Russia would emerge victorious, it simultaneously reinforced an evolutionary conception of socialism as the natural next stage of human society.⁴⁶

The wave of struggle that broke out following the Russian revolution also nurtured Randolph and Owen's hopes that the hour of socialism was at hand. The revolutions in Germany and Hungary, the strike waves in the US and England, and Italy's *biennio rosso* all appeared to Randolph and Owen as confirmation of their views on socialism's imminence. Together, these struggles added up to “the cosmic tread of Soviet government,” marching forward with “ceaseless step.”⁴⁷

During these of years of revolution, Randolph and Owen gave voice to the most radical sentiments that would surface during their managing of the *Messenger*. The years 1918-1919 thus constituted the high point of the journal's radicalism, sandwiched on both sides by far more moderate conceptions of struggle for socialism. This transition is visible in the *Messenger's* first issue published after the October revolution. There, in the course of introducing the Bolsheviks to their readership for the first time, the

46 “Bolshevism and World Democracy,” *Messenger*, July 1918, 11; Chandler Owen, “Peace,” *Messenger*, January 1918, 17. This is precisely the sort of socialist evolutionism which would later lead Walter Benjamin to comment, “Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current.” Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 259.

47 “Two Articles Condemned by the Union League Club of New York,” *Messenger*, May-June 1919, 11.

editors described Lenin and Trotsky as “calling. . . upon the people of every country to follow the lead of Russia; to throw off their exploiting rulers, to administer public utilities for the public welfare, to disgorge the exploiters and profiteers.” Later, in 1919, Randolph and Owen would publish language even more starkly at odds with Hillquit's tranquil visions of social evolution:

But just as the Kaiser spoke imperiously, as his fate was being written by the invisible hand of the German revolution, so are the masters[,] the diplomats of the ruling governments today, thoughtlessly treading upon the crater of an international social volcano, whose molten lava of class passions threaten to drench the land in blood; to wash away the dikes of our false civilization; to sweep on in its course the derelict and hypocritical kings of capitalism, and to erect upon the ruins thereof a new civilization, and a new social order, a true international peoples' republic and a “world Soviet.”⁴⁸

The images of destruction here, as well as the invocation of “class passions,” owe more to the syndicalist theory animating the IWW, Hillquit's great enemy, than the theory of the SP center. Along these lines, the *Messenger* also endorsed the general strike as a tactic to prevent capitalist governments from seeking to overthrow the Bolsheviks.⁴⁹

These manifestations of militancy, however, did not signal any fundamental reconsideration by Randolph and Owen of their basic allegiance to Hillquit's theory of socialist transformation. Indeed, given their frequent

⁴⁸ Indeed, the language here breaks so drastically with the self-assured rationalism of most of Randolph and Owen's writings that there is reason to doubt they even authored it. W.A. Domingo was working quite closely with the *Messenger* at this point, and stands out as a likely candidate. However, further evidence to support this claim is lacking.

⁴⁹ Owen, “Peace,” 7; “Get Out of Russia,” *Messenger*, March 1919, 7; “The General Strike,” *Messenger*, August 1919, 8. This endorsement would later be fully integrated into SP centrism after the upsurge of 1919 had faded. In 1922, Randolph and Owen would return to the subject, and argue that the general strike, “when properly and courageously wielded...is the Nemesis of the ruling class.” The qualifier here is, of course, everything, in that it leaves for substantial discretion in adjudicating “improper” uses of the strike. “The General Strike and Lawlessness,” *Messenger*, June 1922, 427.

praise for the IWW, and their excoriations of the AFL, it is surprising that syndicalist outbursts like the above did not appear more often in the *Messenger*. Moreover, a reformist conception of socialism remains visible even in Randolph and Owen's description of Lenin and Trotsky's call for revolution. There, throwing off the exploiters appears alongside the administration of public utilities for the public good, signaling an ambiguity at the heart of their theory of socialism. The militant notes sounded in 1918-1919, therefore, represent not a fundamental break with Hillquit and the SP center, but rather a temporary attempt to marry the insurrectionary energies of the postwar conjuncture with the evolutionist theory of the SP, an attempt abandoned as soon as those energies dissipated.

The persistence of Randolph and Owen's attachment to socialist evolutionism surfaces similarly in their enthusiasm for the wave of working-class struggle outside of Russia. In Germany, Owen explicitly supported the moderate socialists against the radicals before the fall of the kaiser. While it was "easy to point superficially at [Philipp] Scheideman [leader of the moderate socialists in Germany] because he supports his government's war measures," Owen argued that the antiwar critics erred in expecting that a French occupation would be more conducive to socialism. This endorsement of nationalist belligerence was followed by an explanation of the SP's policy on American participation in the war, where Owen explained that the SP was attempting to convince the American state to act as a "peace mediator" by encouraging the "spirit of peace" within it. Once more, the structural forces acting on the capitalist state are elided, and a government's participation in war

explained by nebulous spirits.⁵⁰

Randolph and Owen's pamphlet "The Terms of Peace and the Darker Nations" illustrates the *Messenger's* combination of support for Bolshevism with a particularly timid anti-imperialism quite clearly. The pamphlet begins with considerations on what would make for an "honorable" peace, immediately conceding a tremendous amount of ground to pro-war arguments. It proceeds to argue that Wilson is simply misguided for prosecuting the war, as doing so lessens the prospects for democracy in Germany. While pointing to the role of munitions manufacturers and businesses eager to exploit the colonial world in supporting the war, the Randolph and Owen never go so far as to argue for an immediate end to American participation in the war, contenting themselves to highlighting its irrationality. Similarly, the radical thrust of their emphasis on colonial spoils in the war's genesis is blunted by their acceptance of the legitimacy of the European empires. Indeed, in arguing against Britain taking indemnities from Germany in the form of colonial possessions, Randolph and Owen argue that "Britain and France already have more territory than they can develop. Moreover, Germany has a more crowded population which needs an outlet for settlement. . . [and is] more likely to develop those colonies more effectively and efficiently." Acknowledgment of the pecuniary interests involved in the war thus transitions smoothly to advice on the relative efficiency of different settler-colonialisms. Though Randolph

50 Owen, "Peace," 20. Later, after the Kaiser had fallen, and moderate socialists like Scheideman and Friedrich Ebert had come to power, Randolph and Owen would support the radical socialists led by Karl Leibknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Once again, however, this signaled not a fundamental strategic re-orientation, but rather an accommodation to what Randolph and Owen judged the dominant wing of the socialist movement. See "A New Crowd, A New Negro," *Messenger*, May-June 1919, 26-27.

and Owen would later be arrested for speaking against American participation in the war, their writings reveal how shallow their anti-imperialism actually was.⁵¹

The *Messenger's* analysis of the prospects for revolution in the United States at the height of their militancy similarly reveal the deep influence Hillquit's articulation of socialist theory still exerted on their thought. Globally, Randolph and Owen argued that “[c]apital is in a dilemma. If it does not grant labor's demands it will be overthrown by violent revolution. If it grants labor's demands, it will be overthrown by peaceful revolution.” While British, French, and Italian capital were capable of reading the writing on the wall, and would “arrive at a peaceful new order,” the United States would not. Because “American capital is the most hidebound, reactionary, archaic, narrow, and visionless of any similar group in the world,” the next American revolution would come through “blood and tears.” Here, Randolph and Owen simultaneously advance a revolutionary perspective in the United States while consolidating a theoretical position that would undermine that perspective. The idea that revolution could come simply through capital granting labor's demands was profoundly indebted to Hillquit's vision of peaceful transition, and brings to mind his suggestion that the transition had indeed already begun. More importantly, however, the argument that revolution would have to come

51 A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, *The Terms of Peace and the Darker Nations* (New York: Poole Press Association, 1917), 24. Additionally, the pamphlet's argument about pecuniary interests in war is expressed by means of a profoundly gendered analogy. Quoting the detective's quip “Look for the woman,” Randolph and Owen aver that “The rule of wars and clashes must be: ‘Look for the economic interest.’” Given their identification of the colonies as the economic interest in question, the analogy reproduces the equation of the colonized world with women, and the empires as men. Combined with the invocation of “honor” at the beginning, this makes for a highly gendered account of geopolitics.

through force in the United States was premised on the exceptional character of American capital, which was judged to be out of step with the rest of the world. In this framework, all that had to change was an empirical judgment about either labor's strength or capital's obstinacy, and the theoretical path was already laid to support a strategy of evolutionary socialism in the US. As the tide of class struggle receded from its high point after 1919, this would be precisely the path Randolph and Owen would travel.⁵²

The *Messenger's* response to the revolution thus encompassed two tendencies. First and foremost, it served as a source of inspiration, lending weight to Randolph and Owen's socialist convictions. The Bolshevik victory, more than any other single event, made it feel as if to be a socialist was to be on the winning side of history. The power such a conviction could carry in the years after WWI can hardly be underestimated. But even as the revolution licensed a period of political audacity from the *Messenger*, the interpretation of it developed there consolidated Randolph and Owen's commitment to the theoretical apparatus articulated by Morris Hillquit and the SP center, creating the conditions for their later anticommunism. As much as this framework constrained their reception of the revolution, however, it did not prevent them from mobilizing the revolution creatively in a host of ways to advance their political project in the United States. It is to these mobilizations that we now turn.

⁵² "Strike Influenza," *Messenger*, November 1919, 6.

Bringing the Revolution Home, Part II

For Randolph and Owen, the Russian revolution presented an opportunity. The spectacle of socialists coming to power in one of the most powerful empires of Europe seemed a potent endorsement by history itself of their aims, and the *Messenger* editors fully intended to get as much out of this endorsement as possible. To this end, they turned to the Russian revolution as a resource to be drawn on for strengthening their own interventions into American politics. There were two key areas towards which they directed this mobilization: internationalism and the struggle against white supremacy.

From their first issue, Randolph and Owen maintained a resolutely international perspective. While frequently conceding to aspects of American nationalism, and, as we have seen, unwilling to defend internationalists in Europe who stood against the war, they nonetheless always conceived of their project as part of an international one, whose consummation would only be achieved by a global workers movement. Arguing for this perspective in the context of struggles in the US constituted one of the *Messenger's* main interventions. The Russian revolution came to serve as an important resource in this endeavor. The Bolsheviks' internationalism, from their anti-colonialism to the institutions of the Third International, became an example of how “the international method,” as Randolph and Owen called it, could bear fruit.⁵³

Chandler Owen was particularly impressed with the way the Bolsheviks attempted to secure peace with Germany by encouraging a social revolution

⁵³ The *Messenger's* tolerant attitude towards American nationalism is visible in the ironically titled “We Want More Bolshevik Patriotism,” which attempts to rewrite the Bolshevik political project as one congruent with an enlightened nationalism. “We Want More Bolshevik Patriotism,” *Messenger*, May-June 1919, 29.

there. Owen notes that the Soviet government's "democratic doctrine" was affecting German public opinion. By "attacking [German] policies," the Bolsheviks were "changing Germany's psychology." Indeed, Trotsky, as Russia's new Commissar for Foreign Affairs, made the construction of transnational political linkages a central component of his work. He worked in conjunction with the new Soviet Commander in Chief Nikolai Krylenko, who immediately ordered a "cease fire and 'fraternization on the fronts.'" Krylenko and Trotsky hoped that "through contact with the Russian troops the German Army would become infected with revolution." Trotsky also demanded as a condition for a truce that German authorities "expressly [allow] the Soviets to conduct revolutionary agitation among German and Austrian troops." The Bolsheviks thus made linkages between the soldiers of hostile nations a key component in their foreign policy.⁵⁴

In the same article, Owen noted how the world's rulers were also aware of the growing connections between revolutionary politics in different countries. He recounts with glee British Prime Minister Lloyd George's proclamation that "A Revolutionary Russia can never be anything but a menace to the Prussian autocracy." This dynamic of revolutionary cross-pollination served as a model for Randolph and Owen of the sort of politics that could achieve black freedom in the US. They noted that in an earlier moment, black leaders had embraced this perspective, recounting Frederick Douglass' campaigning in England for abolition. However, in the present, the "old crowd" black leaders, from Du Bois to Moton, were deferring to the wishes of American capitalists in confining the

⁵⁴ Owen, "Psychology Will Win This War," *Messenger*, July 1918, 19; Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed – Trotsky, 1879-1921* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 350, 352.

“Negro problem” to a domestic stage.⁵⁵ The example of the revolution, however, demonstrated that the time was again ripe for the black struggle to be carried out internationally.⁵⁶

This attention to, and willing to learn from, the international situation belies the retrospective nationalism that has crept into some biographical accounts of Randolph, which explains his anticommunism through a purported commitment to democratic, indigenous American radicalism.⁵⁷ Yet even as late as 1922, Randolph and Owen were still looking to the Bolsheviks to set a lead for the international movement. In March of that year, in the course of an article on strikes among South African miners, they explicitly call for “The Amsterdam Trade Union International, the Red Trade Union International, the Second International, the Vienna Working Union, and the Third International” to formulate a clear policy on the inclusion of black workers in the South African labor movement. Far from being opposed to taking direction from outside of the country, Randolph and Owen positively welcomed it. This was particularly so in cases such as the South African one, where bodies like Red Trade Union International or the Third International could give much-needed support to forces arguing against racism in the labor movement.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ This is, of course, hardly a fair comment on Du Bois.

⁵⁶ Owen, “Psychology Will Win This War,” 19; “Internationalism,” *Messenger*, August 1919, 6.

⁵⁷ Paula Pfeffer, for example, argues that “Randolph was unalterably opposed to taking direction from a source outside the United States.” Paula Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph: Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 17-18. Citing Pfeffer, George Hutchinson similarly argues that Randolph thought socialists “should resist direction from outside the United States.” *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 291. Contrary to these portraits of a hermetic nativism, Randolph and Owen actively looked to international groups like the Third International for guidance.

⁵⁸ “Revolt in South Africa,” *Messenger*, March 1922, 371. The mélange of organizations listed here testifies to Randolph and Owen's abiding centrism, in their desire to repress the political divides fracturing the socialist movement in the name of restoring an antediluvian unity.

As their appeal to the Comintern suggests, Randolph and Owen also viewed the Russian revolution as a resource in advancing the struggle against white supremacy. As the revolution developed, and the Bolsheviks made a point of combating anti-Semitism in Russia and colonialism abroad, Randolph and Owen found in the revolution both proof that racism could be attacked successfully, as well as an example of the kind of politics black Americans would need for their struggle.

As with Johnson, the analogy between blacks in the United States and Jews in Russia did significant work in the attempt to translate Bolshevik politics into something useful for combating white supremacy in the US. Randolph and Owen noted the Bolshevik policy towards anti-Semitism early on, arguing that the “persecution of the Jewish people...has been winked at and colluded in by the governments of every country except Soviet Russia.” The Bolshevik record on anti-Semitism would continue to impress the writers for the *Messenger* even after they had cooled towards the Third International. In 1923, Randolph and Owen noted that it was “to the eternal credit and honor of Soviet Russia that the hydra-headed monster of anti-Semitism was killed by the revolution.”⁵⁹

The achievement of the Soviet policy on anti-Semitism were mobilized most decisively for American conditions in W.A. Domingo's essay “Did Bolshevism Stop Race Riots in Russia?” Domingo argued that, under the czar, “Jews were treated in very much the same manner as Negroes are treated in the

59 “Jewish Pogroms,” *Messenger*, July 1919, 5; “Jew Baiting,” *Messenger*, December 1923, 919.

democratic United States.”⁶⁰ After the revolution, however, the Bolsheviks set out to “suppress and punish” those who kept alive “the old psychology of race-hatred.” By means of a few “executions of lynchers and race-rioters, the Bolshevik government succeeded in making Soviet Russia unsafe for mobocrats, but safe for Jews and other oppressed racial minorities.” For Domingo, the example of Soviet Russia proved clearly that an American Bolshevism could end race riots by the “eradication of the causes of such disgraceful occurrences as the Washington and Chicago race riots.”⁶¹

This argument served two purposes – it allowed the *Messenger* to boldly argue that racism could be smashed in the United States, and it pointed to socialist victory as the means for doing so. In the US at this time, the first proposition was hardly self-evident. Indeed, the weight of white supremacy was such that accommodationist strategies still commanded significant popular support, especially in the absence of successful militant alternatives. Domingo and the *Messenger* hoped that the example of the Soviet Union could serve as such an alternative. Once black Americans were convinced that white supremacy was not invulnerable to assault, it was hoped, they would be more open to the kinds of militant strategies the *Messenger* was proposing.

Additionally, the argument that an American Bolshevism could stop race riots served to address a very specific fear Randolph and Owen had raised in the *Messenger* previously: that black Americans would remain outside the current radicalization, and even possibly act as a threat to it. In “The Negro: A

60 Domingo also took this opportunity to snipe at W.E.B. Du Bois for his infamous “Close Ranks” editorial, noting that “Jewish fealty to Russia prove[d] non-effective in abating their persecution and suffering.”

61 W.A. Domingo, “Did Bolshevism Stop Race Riots in Russia?” *Messenger*, September 1919, 26–27.

Menace to Radicalism?” Randolph and Owen use the example of an anti-Bolshevik sermon by a black Southern pastor to warn of the possibility of black workers becoming a bulwark of reaction in the US. Warning white radicals that “ten million Negro soldiers and scabs will break the back of any radical movement,” the article sounded a note of alarm for those who would discount the importance of organizing black workers. For black radicals, the situation was “doubly huge and difficult,” combating both the racism of white radicals and the conservative forces in black communities.⁶²

Domingo's article served to make this task more manageable by presenting a case for socialism that would appeal directly to black Americans. By demonstrating that socialism was the route by which race riots could be eliminated, Domingo thus found an avenue for combating the hegemony of black accommodationism. The Russian revolution here served not only as a means for winning blacks to socialism in the abstract, but as the remedy to a specific weakness the *Messenger* had located in the revolutionary project in the US.

The *Messenger's* arguments that white supremacy was indeed vulnerable, even in the United States, supported a broader set of propositions about the best strategies for black struggle in the US. As we have seen, an internationalist perspective was an important component of these. Additionally, Randolph and Owen urged their readers to look to the labor movement, arguing that since the overwhelming majority of blacks were proletarians, the labor movement

62 “The Negro – A Menace to Radicalism?” *Messenger*, May-June 1919, 20. On conservatism in black communities during this period, see Brian Kelly, “Sentinels for New South Industry: Booker T. Washington, Black Accommodation, and Black Workers in the Jim Crow South,” *Labor History* 44 no. 3 (2003): 337-357.

constituted one of their best prospects for empowerment. Alongside these more specific strategic orientations there existed a recurring call for boldness and audacity in the struggle against black oppression. Here, the Russian revolution was invoked as an example for black Americans to follow, a manifestation of the spirit of resistance needed.⁶³

For Randolph and Owen, the concept of the New Negro was itself articulated through the revolution. Randolph's essay "A New Crowd – A New Negro" spends a page discussing the international situation before moving on to the question of black leadership. The Bolsheviks are celebrated for driving "their hateful oppressors from power" and creating "a new social machinery – the soviet – to express the growing class consciousness of the teeming millions." From Germany to Hungary to England to Egypt, Randolph paints a picture of revolution on the horizon. In this context, he argues that the black American "must tear down his false leaders, just as the people of Europe are tearing down their false leaders." He goes on to name William Pickens, Kelly Miller, and W. E. B. Du Bois, among others, as exemplars of this "Old Crowd" which must be overcome. Though the analogy between the czar and Kelly Miller is perhaps strained, the goal of his rhetoric is nonetheless clear. The New Negro must arise as the American expression of the spirit of the age. This new crowd will be composed of "young men who are educated, radical, and fearless." The "revolutions ushering in a New World" will be greeted with gladness, not feared, by the new crowd. By the end of the essay, Randolph has effectively made a

⁶³ See, for example, their arguments in support of Morris Hillquit, where they argue that because the Socialist Party is "the Party of the workingman" and "99 per cent of Negroes are working people," the SP is natural home for black voters. "Some Reasons Why Negroes Should Vote the Socialist Ticket," *Messenger*, November 1917, 34.

recruiting pitch for the New Negro. Structured as it is by his invocation of the Russian revolution, Randolph seems to be saying to his readers “Lenin and Trotsky want YOU to join the New Negro!”⁶⁴

Domingo also identified the New Negro with the Russian revolution. He situated black struggle in the US alongside “[t]he white workers of Russia, the yellow coolies of Korea, the brown ryots of India, and the black toilers Africa.” All were part of the common struggle of oppressor vs. oppressed. For Domingo, this struggle had specific implications for who, exactly, could be counted on to support the New Negro. Since the struggle was, at bottom, about exploitation, which formed “the common denominator of oppressors everywhere,” not all black Americans would participate - “Negro employers rob their employees regardless of race or color.” This class divide in black communities meant that, for most, the Socialist Party was the only consistent defender of their interests, since it spoke for their class. Domingo closed the piece with an appeal for Eugene Debs in the 1920 election. The Russian revolution thus served to lubricate the work of identifying the New Negro with the Socialist Party. By identifying the common spirit of rebellion that linked the two, Domingo was able to pull from that an account of the struggle that rewrote the New Negro as a class conscious worker.⁶⁵

For the *Messenger*, the equation between Bolshevism and black militancy was such that one could serve as shorthand for the other. In Victor Daly's reply to the letter criticizing the *Messenger's* endorsement of Bolshevism, he imagined “what a death blow it would be to [capital] if the iron battalions of the twelve

64 “A New Crowd, A New Negro,” *Messenger*, 26-27. Here the masculinism of Randolph's conception of socialism emerges with particular clarity.

65 A. Philip Randolph, “A New Negro and a New Day,” *Messenger*, November 1920, 144-145.

million Negro workers could be mobilized as an 'army of manouevre' on the side of American labor. This is our deliberate purpose." For Daly, if this was what his interlocutor meant by Bolshevism, "then classify me, too. . . as a Bolshevik." Later, Randolph and Owen would use Bolshevism again as a synonym for black agency, this time in the context of an article excoriating Charles Gilpin for saying he did not wish to "force an association" with white drama critics. After heaping calumny on Gilpin for what they considered his cowardice, Randolph and Owen outlined the multitude of ways in which the campaigns against "social equality" were contravened by the everyday doxa of white supremacy, from black nursemaids to white men's sexual abuse of black women. Describing the "millions of mulattoes" in the United States, Randolph and Owen cautioned their readers, with dripping sarcasm, that "it smacks of rank, impudent Bolshevism for smart Negroes to be asking questions about such things." Here, Randolph and Owen anticipated the imbrication of communism and race-mixing that would develop during the Civil Rights era, but with the evaluative valence decidedly different. For the *Messenger*, it was Bolshevism indeed for black Americans to move against Jim Crow, and they hoped to see more of it.⁶⁶

The *Messenger's* association of black defiance with Bolshevism exposes another historiographical myth that has grown up around the journal: that it was more "class conscious" than "race conscious."⁶⁷ While it is certainly true that Randolph and Owen had a mechanistic understanding of race, frequently

66 "A Most Interesting Controversy"; "Charles Gilpin and the Drama League," *Messenger*, March 1921, 203.

67 Cornelius Bynum is responsible for fabricating this particularly constricting straightjacket for interpreting the *Messenger*, but the basic judgment he uses it to support is repeated elsewhere. Jeffrey B. Perry, for example, insists on referring to Randolph and Owen as "class first" radicals, distinguished from Harrison's "race conscious radicalism." See Bynum, Ch 4; Perry 268, 311, 363.

implying that black workers were oppressed simply because they were poorer, and publishing the Socialist Party's reductionist pamphlet, "The Next Emancipation," this did not prevent them from arguing for a black insurgency against white supremacy, and endorsing tactics from general strikes to armed resistance.⁶⁸ In one of their articles on the general strike, for example, they argue that a general strike by "Negro workers" could "awaken the entire world to the Negro problem." In his reporting on the Tulsa race riot, Chandler Owen endorsed the armed self-defense of the black community. The *Messenger's* iconography also reinforced this radicalism, portraying the New Negro as a gun-wielding man shooting back at cowardly racists.⁶⁹

In fact, compared to the *Messenger's* often ambiguous endorsements of Bolshevism, their tepid anti-imperialism, and their staunch support of the SP center, a case can be made that the journal's politics were actually more consistently radical around race than class. It was ceaseless in its attacks on lynch law, on the klan, and on unions that excluded black workers. And while Randolph and Owen tended to rely on education, rather than black struggle, as the means to convince unions to organize interracially, they never gave any credence to the idea that white supremacy in the US could be toppled with anything besides militant struggle. Their endorsement of the most militant tactics in the struggle against black oppression stands in stark contrast to their refusal to ever adopt a solidly insurrectionary perspective on the class struggle in the US. The fact that they argued for these strategies on the basis of a

68 In one article, Randolph and Owen argue that white coal miners are treated as badly as black miners, "[a]nother case where race prejudice goes a-flying before the avenging wrath of the God of Private Profits." "Mingo Labor Wars," *Messenger*, July 1921, 214. Barbara Foley has the best examination of the treatment of race in the journal in *Spectres*, 90-98.

69 Owen, "Tulsa," *Messenger*, July 1921, 220-2.

reductionist and mechanistic theory of the relationship between race and capitalism should give pause to those who argue that such theories inevitably lead to a practice that subordinates race struggle to class struggle. Indeed, it would be in the mid-1920s, when Randolph and Owen began to expand their theorization of race in the US, and argue that racism did not merely stem from the poverty of black workers, but affected the race as a whole, that they would finally truly subordinate race to class by reconciling themselves with the still-racist AFL. In an earlier moment, however, the *Messenger* showed that it was more willing to extend the radicalism emanating out of Russia to the race question than the class question.

The *Messenger's* willingness to mobilize the Russian revolution towards the ends of its political project in the US demonstrates that its constrained interpretation of the revolution did not prevent an appreciation of its importance for radicals in the United States. On two of the points – internationalism and racism – that the American left was precisely its weakest, Randolph and Owen turned to Russia to bolster their case for an internationalist, anti-racist workers movement. The marks of SP centrism remained on the arguments they developed out of this strategy, however, and when it became clear that the revolutionary wave had crested in 1919, they were unable to sustain this intervention.

Reaction and Realignment

By 1921, it had become clear that, domestically and abroad, immediate

revolution was no longer the order of the day. Though the struggles that had radiated outwards from Russia had dramatically reshaped the globe, the chances for the establishment of new socialist states were no longer growing, but diminishing. In Italy, the fascists loomed ominously on the horizon. In Germany, the sustained and bitter conflict between the social democrats and the communists made a joke of the *Messenger's* hopes for the continued growth of a united left. In the US, the defeat of the great steel strike in 1919 set the stage for an employer's offensive throughout the 1920s, in which unions were broken and working class living standards made even more precarious.⁷⁰

In Russia, the Bolsheviks faced not defeat, but instead a Pyrrhic victory in the civil war. Though the counterrevolutionary white armies had been defeated, Russia was left devastated. By the time the white armies had been defeated, only two thirds of the land under cultivation before the war was being farmed – and even this land was being worked without fertilizer or machinery. In the two-year period following the war's end, more Russians would die from hunger and disease than had perished in the World War and Civil War combined. Starving peasants turned to cannibalism. The Soviet writer Ilia Ehrenburg remembered everyday life as “prehistoric, the everyday life of the cave age.” The image of Russia as a workers' paradise, or even an exemplar of progress, had been dealt a vicious blow.⁷¹

In this situation, the fragile equilibrium that had developed between the reality of the Russian revolution and the *Messenger's* interpretation of it was

⁷⁰ See Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London: Verso, 1986), 51

⁷¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 85; Ehrenburg qtd in W. Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 364.

broken. Randolph and Owen's evolutionist ecumenicism was premised upon the continued advance of socialism. While the world revolution appeared to be advancing, the divisions that existed in the socialist movement could be overlooked as mere squabbles or misunderstandings that would be resolved by the *deus ex machina* of an imminent victory. However, when the movement was in retreat, and the way forward uncertain, such divisions could no longer be ignored. Similarly, when Russia's devastation made it clear that the transition to socialism there would be a fractious one, the assertion of a fundamental commonality between the socialist project of the Bolsheviks and of the SP was challenged.

Randolph and Owen did not react to these incongruities with immediate disavowal.⁷² Indeed, their first response to the devastation in Russia was to argue for a labor-led relief campaign for the beleaguered Bolsheviks. From early on, the *Messenger* had propagandized against the blockade capitalist governments had erected against the revolutionary government. Citing the Bolsheviks' antiracism, Randolph and Owen compared the young Soviet state to "the Haytian republic. . . led by Toussaint L'Overture," and the capitalist blockade to Napoleon's war on the black republic. This comparison reinforced the analogy between the Bolsheviks and black self-assertion, while simultaneously suggesting that the revolution itself was a global blow to white supremacy. By joining these two revolutions, Randolph and Owen used the counterrevolutionary strategies of the capitalist world as evidence in building

72 Jervis Anderson thus exaggerates the rapidity with which the *Messenger's* writers turned away from Russia when he writes "[t]he *Messenger* would suddenly lose its enthusiasm for the Russian dance" in 1921. Indeed, the loss of enthusiasm was hardly sudden, and the ideological strains which would ultimately force the turn were visible even at the height of the magazine's engagement with Russia. Anderson, 89.

their case for the importance of the revolution to black Americans.⁷³

As the scale of the devastation in Russia became clear, the *Messenger* shifted from agitation against the blockade to a campaign for a labor-led relief effort in Russia. One of the first articles to address the subject of aid for Russia was the September 1921 editorial “Hoover and Relief for Soviet Russia.” Recounting how Herbert Hoover made the release of American counterrevolutionaries a precondition for food aid, Owen and Randolph emphasized the reasonability of the Soviet government in acquiescing to such a request. At the same time that they condemned the actions of “the Food Dictator,” the *Messenger* editors also used the issue as a platform around which to draw workers in America. They ended their article with a call: “Let the American workers, white and black, Jew and Gentile, combine to drive the gaunt specter of starvation from the confines of the first Workers’ Republic!”⁷⁴

The *Messenger*’s next issue elaborated on the same theme of imperialist culpability for Soviet deprivation. In an editorial, Owen and Randolph praised the relief efforts of organized labor, to whom they attributed the motive of “maintaining the first workers’ republic of the world.” Whether or not such motives really were at the heart of the Russian relief effort, by constructing them as such the *Messenger* editors could maintain their argument that revolution was still on the agenda for the workers’ movement. At the same time that they praised organized labor, they also attacked the counterrevolutionary relief efforts of the imperialist countries, noting that “[h]ad the Russian people not been compelled to fight the United States, France, Great Britain, Poland, and

⁷³ “The Russian Blockade,” *Messenger*, November 1919, 18.

⁷⁴ “Hoover and Relief for Soviet Russia,” *Messenger*, September 1921, 243.

nearly all the surrounding states. . . the Russian people would be fairly well able to take care of their own needs.”⁷⁵

Randolph and Owen also sought to inject revolutionary politics into the debates they had with trade unionists of the day. In their August 1921 issue, the editors had condemned the American Federation of Labor’s convention on a number of issues, including failing to condemn the Ku Klux Klan and opposing trade with Russia. In the October issue, convention delegate Louis Langer wrote to the *Messenger* to defend the federation. Langer wrote that he was not “ready to defend the Convention in its attitude of opposing trade relations with Russia. This is a problem that need be discussed by a political economist.” Randolph and Owen excoriated Langer for this agnosticism, replying that it is no “more imperative that one be a political economist, in order to know that trade is essential to the life of a nation than it is imperative for one to be a physician in order to know that blood is essential to human life.” They then went on to list the reasons why American labor should be in support of the Soviet state. First among these was that “it is to the interest of Labor, everywhere, that the first Workers’ Republic of the world should live.” Here Randolph and Owen’s analysis of the interests of American workers, black and white, posited Russia as a key source of strength for the American labor movement. In their words, “it is also an inspiration to labor everywhere, ever to strive for its emancipation from capitalist slavery.” Just as Owen and Randolph themselves drew upon the Russian Revolution for political inspiration, so they advocated that the workers’

⁷⁵ “Editorial,” *Messenger*, October 1921, 258. For the history of US intervention against the Bolsheviks, see David S. Foglesong, *America’s Secret War Against Bolshevism: US Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1920* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001).

movement in America do the same.⁷⁶

Just as the solidarity campaign revealed Randolph and Owen's continued fidelity to the revolution, however, it also was indicative of an ongoing shift in their perspective, as the Bolsheviks began to be invoked less as teachers of strategic lessons, and more as a nebulously defined "inspiration." In this, Randolph and Owen came to more closely resemble Hillquit's position on the revolution, lauding its achievements from afar while demurring on any strategic rethinking it might compel.

This reevaluation of the revolution was part of a larger political shift to the right occurring at the *Messenger*. In the early twenties, as the experience of defeat resonated across the international left, a whole number of political positions that were virtually axiomatic to the journal's politics a few years earlier were jettisoned. Most fundamentally, a conception of the socialist movement as one that advanced together, whatever temporary and contingent fault lines may run through it at a given moment, had to be abandoned. The new Communist Parties, which retained an insurrectionary strategic perspective even in the era of political retreat, offered vitriolic condemnations of Socialist betrayals. In the conjuncture of the early twenties, when the way forward for the Left was anything but clear, these attacks could not simply be shrugged off as the product of misunderstanding or impatience. Advocates of evolutionary socialism had to defend their perspective, and argue why it was more plausible than their opponents'. In this context, the equilibrium that had held at the *Messenger* could hold no longer, and the attempt to carve out a synthesis between Hillquit

⁷⁶ "The A.F. of L Convention," *Messenger*, August 1921, 226.

and October faltered.

The starkest revision Randolph and Owen made to their earlier political commitments concerned their evaluation of the AFL. Where once they heaped abuse on the organization, even calling for its destruction, now they expressed a cautious optimism regarding its utility to American workers. Commenting on the federation's 1923 convention, they noted that “[i]t is unfortunate that it does not embrace all of the organized labor groups in the country,” but consoled their readers with the fact that “[t]here is no unified labor movement anywhere in the world – not even in Soviet Russia.” A few years earlier, the example of Russia had been mobilized to excoriate the timidity of American labor leaders. Now, the dilemmas of the post-revolutionary state are employed to diminish the importance of the federation's capitulation to white supremacy. Later, Randolph and Owen would urge the NAACP to invite Samuel Gompers to address its convention, arguing that such a move would allow the association to “rid itself of the handicap of its present bourgeois stigma.” By proposing that Gompers, apostle of the most bourgeois forms of trade unionism, could now be cast as the force to purge bourgeois stigma from the NAACP, Randolph and Owen revealed how irenic their conception of the transformation of the association actually was. Gompers had moved from the right wing of the *Messenger's* political horizon to become a force capable of pulling others to the left.⁷⁷ Gompers, of course, remained the same as he had been in 1919. It was Randolph and Owen who changed.⁷⁸

77 Manning Marable claims that later, Randolph would “ban” articles critical of Gompers' successor, William Green. Marable, 18.

78 “The American Federation of Labor Convention,” *Messenger*, October 1923, 829; “The N.A.A.C.P.'s Conference,” *Messenger*, July 1924, 210. Randolph and Owen's re-evaluation of

Hillquit's evolutionary socialism helped anesthetize any discomfort resulting from this adjustment. The theory of the state deployed in his work emphasized the flexibility of the institutions of capitalist society, and the potential for those institutions to be transformed to fit the needs of socialism. It was a small conceptual step to apply this same logic to the AFL. With the IWW dismembered by state repression, the AFL remained the only plausible institutional agency for advancing the interests of labor. Hillquit's arguments provided all of the theoretical justifications necessary for such a shift. Just as the state, though marked by its existence in capitalist society, was nonetheless ineluctably moving towards its socialist destination, so the AFL could manifest all manner of imperfections, and yet serve its role as the avatar of workers struggle. What was once figured as qualitative change had been rendered merely quantitative.⁷⁹

The *Messenger's* mobilization of the example of a divided Russian labor movement to justify its tolerance of the AFL's racism also suggests a re-evaluation of the course of the post-revolutionary society. Randolph and Owen's argument that "not even in Soviet Russia" had the labor movement been able to overcome its own contradictions indicates a certain revision downwards of their

Gompers sheds light on what Kornweibel calls their "unclear" motives in deciding to to coalition with moderate white trade unionists in mid-1925. He provisionally suggests that the attempt was driven by a desire to present a united counterweight to communist labor organizing. Once more, however, Kornweibel discounts the effect Randolph and Owen's own political ideology had in driving their decisions. Their praise for Gompers, and general support for the AFL after the early 1920s, make their organizing with moderate white unionists far less puzzling. Later, Kornweibel notes Randolph's re-evaluation of the AFL, but casts the move entirely as a "pragmatic" response to the weakness of American labor. Though at pains to deny that this represented any ideological change on Randolph's part, Kornweibel's account gives no hint of the complex interplay between Randolph's ideology and changes in the political conjuncture. See Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair*, 186-189.

79 On the IWW's destruction, see Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

estimation of the achievements of the revolution. No longer were they writing paeans to the Bolsheviks, lauding them for their success in eradicating anti-Semitism. Instead, the focus of the *Messenger's* attention shifted to the difficulties facing the post-revolutionary regime. If, on one level this represented a shift that any honest observer, given the devastation and desperation in Russia, could not help but make, it is also true that Randolph and Owen proved only too willing to instrumentalize the Bolsheviks' situation to justify their own re-evaluation of the political conjuncture. Rather than an example of the disasters that await an isolated revolution in an underdeveloped country, Russia served as an example of how radicals the world over should lower their political expectations.⁸⁰

This re-evaluation of the significance of Russia was expressed most clearly in an April 1923 editorial entitled "Why Not Recognize Soviet Russia?" Here, amidst polemic comparing the League of Nations to the Holy Alliance of Metternich, Randolph and Owen offered thoughts on Soviet policy that revealed how far they had come in four short years. They noted that "if Soviet Russia keeps trending toward the right," the capitalist governments would inevitably recognize the regime as it ceased to pose a threat to other ruling classes.⁸¹ More interesting than their recognition of an undeniable rightward trend in Soviet policy, however, was Randolph and Owen's theorization of it. The turn to the

⁸⁰ Similarly, the May Day editorial in 1923 described "the expanding power and culture of labor in Russia, England, Germany, India, China, Japan, Italy France, Mexico, and the United States of America." Here, countries in which the level of working class struggle varied drastically were united as evidence of single trend upwards. The specific achievements of the revolution in Russia are no longer of interest, and it becomes simply one more exemplar of labor's forward march. "May Day," *Messenger*, May 1923, 689.

⁸¹ By "trending towards the right," Randolph and Owen were referring to the New Economic Policy, which was designed to stimulate economic growth through the impositions of markets in the countryside.

right, they argued, “was inevitable. It is an obedience to the inexorable laws of social physics. . . [that] seems to be eminently proper, practical, and sound.”

This passage is telling in a number of ways. The words they use to praise the turn are hardly radical, bringing to mind Babbitt before Bolsheviks. Their formulation of laws of social physics bespeaks an exceptionally determinist social theory – and unsurprising development, given their increasing vocalization of the assumptions structuring their evolutionary socialism. More significant than this formalistic conception of the operation of historical causality, however, is the content Randolph and Owen seek to give these laws. Here, they appear to construct an analogy with Newton's Third Law of Motion, positing an inevitable opposing reaction to any social motion. The notion that revolution generates a response is uncontroversial enough, but Randolph and Owen go much further, apparently endorsing the reaction itself as part of the natural course of social evolution. In this, their historical theory comes close to abandoning even the stale evolutionism of Hillquit in favor of a vision of history as oscillation. This deeply anti-radical historical theory is then combined with a frank disclosure of the perspective that now animated their commentary on Russia: “Russia is not yet ready for Communism.”⁸²

If Randolph and Owen were willing to offer their endorsement of recent shifts in the direction of the Russian state, they were less interested in countenancing the actions of the Communist Parties inspired by and acting in

82 “Why Not Recognize Soviet Russia?” *Messenger*, April 1923, 656-657. Later, Randolph and Owen would put the same point even more unequivocally: “Communism can be of no earthly benefit to either white or Negro workers in America. It is even being replaced in the interest of the Russian worker in obedience to the material exigencies of the situation by State Capitalism by Lenin and Trotsky, after realizing its impracticability at the present stage of economic development of Russia.” “The Menace of Negro Communists,” *Messenger*, August 1923, 784.

concert with it. The key turn in the *Messenger's* relationship with communism would come not from any events in Russia, however, but from the rise of Communist Parties in the US and abroad as political competition to the socialist parties. The actions of the KPD in Germany and the CPUSA loom large here.

Competition between socialists and Communists was particularly fierce in Germany. In 1919, moderate socialists had been in the government that murdered Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, leaders of the radical current in Germany. At this point, a line was drawn in blood between socialists and those who would go on to become communists. As the *Messenger* developed its perspective on communism's untimeliness in the present conjuncture, it developed a quite hostile perspective on the actions of KPD.⁸³

This perspective was developed largely by George Schuyler, who joined the *Messenger's* writers in 1922. Originally hired to take over Chandler Owen's office duties, he eventually became a central force in the journal, performing a tremendous amount of sales and production work as well as producing lengthy articles. Though he had a past as a socialist street-corner speaker in Syracuse, in New York he quickly developed into into a sort of Bohemian cynic, to whom the fervor of the communist movement was no doubt particularly offensive.⁸⁴

Though signs of discomfiture with the direction the communist movement was taking were visible prior to Schuyler's involvement, his writings qualitatively intensified the degree of hostility the *Messenger* directed towards

⁸³ The classic history of the German revolution is Pierre Broue, *The German Revolution, 1917-1923* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006).

⁸⁴ Jeffrey B. Ferguson, *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 75-79. Ferguson notes that "Schuyler considered himself more of Hobohemian than a straight advocate of the black proletariat."

both the USSR and communists worldwide.⁸⁵ A gifted polemicist, Schuyler did not hesitate to use all his talents in hurling obloquy at the Soviet Union and its allies. For Schuyler, communists are a species of fanatic comparable to “the Fascisti [or] Ku Klux Klan.” Devotees of such causes are “immune to reasons or facts.”⁸⁶ While often critical of the black communists in the African Blood Brotherhood, his sharpest darts were reserved for the KPD, engaged at the time in fierce struggle against both the rising fascist movement and the larger socialist party. Schuyler dutifully repeated the arguments of the German socialist newspaper that “the German Communists and Fascisti have formed an alliance, the former by direction of the Muscovite phraseocracy.” Explaining to his readers that the fascists were analogous to the klan, Schuyler disingenuously queried whether “Negro Communists will get orders to work with the notorious Midnight Marauders.” In a later issue, Schuyler would directly compare the KPD's actions to the KKK's, citing a *New York Times* story about political violence in central Germany. “Even the German Communists,” he sneered, “are

85 See, for example, Owen's response to WA Domingo's criticism of their xenophobic deportation campaign against Marcus Garvey, where he asserted that he does not follow “every dot of the 'i' and crossing of the 't' as our objector does the tenets of Moscow. Owen, “Should Garvey Be Deported?” *Messenger*, March 1923, 642. See also the strangely unenthusiastic report on Claude McKay's arguments before the Fourth Congress of the Comintern. Instead of reporting on McKay's speeches about the need for communists to take up the struggle against black oppression, the editorial argues (at some length) that McKay's participation in the congress proves “that races have similar vices and virtues...Thus, that Negroes, like whites, elect to study the new social phenomena of a workers's republic, should not strike us as strange at all.” “Negroes in Soviet Russia,” *Messenger*, April 1923, 653.

86 For the role of such designations of fanaticism in modern political thought, see Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010). In the same essay, Schuyler goes on to heap abuse on “sexual perverts,” “queer pushers,” and “drug peddlers.” Though he ultimately blames capitalism for creating them, he goes on to envision a post-capitalist future in which they would be “treat[ed] in psychopathic clinics instead of...[bred] in slums and train[ed] in prisons.” Schuyler's essay is an exercise in convergent anathematization, as both communists and social misfits are cast as threats to the body politic, unreachable by rational discourse, who can only be quarantined. Ironically, Schuyler's arguments also provide the only instance where the nexus between evolutionary socialism and eugenics, common in the SP more broadly, found expression in the *Messenger*. George Schuyler, “Lights and Shadows of the Underworld,” *Messenger*, August 1923, 787-799.

getting the good old Southern cavalier spirit.”⁸⁷

In these passages, Schuyler works to reverse the identification between Negroes and the Bolsheviks cultivated in earlier issues of the *Messenger*. Communists are now aligned with the forces of reaction and white supremacy. Though Randolph and Owen never offered this sort of abuse from their own pens, its publication is nonetheless significant for the journal's direction. At the very least, it suggests that the editors no longer felt the USSR to be an important political resource for black struggle. It also signifies a major revision of the journal's perspective on racism. In its earlier years, racism had been a species of domination, part of the general project of domination by which workers, Negroes, inhabitants of the colonies, and all of the rest of the world's oppressed were exploited. Schuyler's lumping of the KKK with the KPD as fanatics of a similar species, deaf to reason and argument, suggests an entirely different conception of racism, however. For Schuyler, racism seems more a failure of even-mindedness than a structure of domination. The *Messenger's* rejection of the communist movement's relevance to black advancement in the US occurred side-by-side a rejection of its own previous theorizing of the nature of white supremacy.

Randolph and Owen's break with communism was not driven solely by international developments; their relationship with American communists also played a role. For the first few years of American Communism, the *Messenger* paid little attention to the movement. Hopelessly riven by factionalism, the early Communists had virtually no impact on black radical politics until about

⁸⁷ George Schuyler, “Shafts and Darts,” *Messenger*, September 1923, 819; George Schuyler, “Civil War in Germany,” *Messenger*, October 1923, 832.

1922, after recruiting much of the African Blood Brotherhood. At that point, they began to seek to compete with established New Negro currents, first attempting (and failing) to break Marcus Garvey's working-class base from his organization, and then turning to the *Messenger*. As a formation associated with the SP, the *Messenger* was especially offensive to the CP, a group whose origins had been in a particularly undemocratic expulsion organized by Hillquit's wing of the party.⁸⁸

Conflict between the *Messenger* and the CP first appeared in 1923, and intensified throughout that year. In February, the journal was still publishing Lovett Fort-Whiteman, who was quickly becoming one of the key black CP leaders. In early summer, however, the CP launched an attack on the SP for an incident at the SP convention when a Southern delegate had, in passing, praised the KKK's role in Southern history. George Schuyler wrote a *faux naïf* letter to the New York *Call* inquiring as to the CP's charges, in the process giving the SP an opportunity to respond. The response, which pointed out that the statement in question was denounced from the floor, was then republished in the *Messenger*.⁸⁹

The same issue of the journal contained a number of other fusillades directed against the CP. The most important was an editorial entitled "The Menace of Negro Communists." In it, Randolph and Owen declared black Communists "either lunatics or agents provocateurs." Importantly, they also called out directly their antagonists' international affiliations, decrying the communists' "preachment and antics about...the Third Internationale."

⁸⁸ On the expulsion, see Draper, 156-161 and Pratt, 140-146.

⁸⁹ George Schuyler, "The Socialist Party and the Negro," *Messenger*, August 1923, 792-794.

Randolph and Owen also developed a theoretical case against the CP's strategy, arguing that "to advocate Communism to the Negro workers before they have even grasped the fundamentals and necessity of simple trade and industrial unionism" was the height of foolishness. Summing up, the editorial concluded that black Communists statements have "revealed that they are utterly devoid of any respect for fact, truth, or honesty."⁹⁰ Given the paucity of publications by black Communists in this period, and the absence of any attacks on the *Messenger* in Cyril Briggs' *Crusader*, it seems probable that the statements to which Randolph and Owen refer were made in person. One likely incident is a meeting of the Friends of Negro Freedom in June 1923, at which black Communists made the allegations about the SP that prompted Schuyler to write to the *Call*. What seems to have happened is that the black Communists in attendance at this meeting denounced the SP for the KKK remark at its convention, and the Black SP supporters present, led by Frank Crosswaith, responded.⁹¹ This incident seems to constitute the crucial breaking point between the *Messenger* and American Communists. Even as late as the June issue of the magazine (which no doubt went to the printers in May), Randolph and Owen were still carrying material defending Communist leader William Z. Foster against state repression.⁹² After the FNF meeting, however, the *Messenger* was unceasingly hostile to American Communism, and increasingly cool towards the USSR as well.⁹³

⁹⁰ "The Menace of Negro Communists," 784.

⁹¹ George Schuyler described the meeting as follows: "This charge [concerning the SP convention and the KKK] was first made by Communists in the Forum of the Friends of Negro Freedom. Frank R. Crosswaith ably answered it." "The Socialist Party and the Negro," 793.

⁹² "William Z. Foster," *Messenger*, June 1923, 748.

⁹³ Of course, the Communist press did not respond to the *Messenger's* attacks with sweetness

Conclusion

The *Messenger's* move to the right continued throughout its remaining few years. Chandler Owen eventually departed for Chicago, and though he and Randolph remained close, he abandoned the left completely, becoming a Republican politician and public relations specialist. Randolph, of course, went on to much bigger things, becoming one of the most important figures in the twentieth century black freedom struggle. In the second half of the 1920s, he immersed himself in building the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Though he would briefly work with the CP in the National Negro Congress, the anticommunism he developed at the *Messenger* remained a generally stable aspect of his political ideology.⁹⁴

Studying the *Messenger's* engagement with the Russian revolution highlights that these political trajectories had deep roots in the analysis developed at the journal. While American historians often portray the changes in Randolph and Owen's thinking as nothing more than pragmatic adaptation to changing conditions, such perspectives neglect the real theoretical perspective that they developed. In such accounts, Randolph and Owen simply react to the world around them, and the dynamic interplay between their attempts to theorize the world and to change it is lost.

This chapter has attempted to recover that interplay by focusing on the

and light, describing the journal as “more a part of the 'Socialist' front against Communism than it is an organ espousing the cause of the colored workers.” *Worker*, August 23, 1923, 6. The *Messenger* then replied to this, and so on.

⁹⁴ See Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001).

Messenger's changing engagement with the Russian revolution. This subject is particularly helpful for bringing Randolph and Owen's theoretical commitments to the fore because of the apparent contradictions that bedevil their relationship to the Bolsheviks. The question of how they could simultaneously laud Lenin and Trotsky, attack the AFL, and criticize the SP's left wing cries out for an account of the ideology that underlay such a congeries of positions. I believe the political theory of the SP center, as exemplified by Hillquit, untangles the contradictions, and helps explain how Randolph and Owen were so easily able to move from being enthusiastic supports of the Bolsheviks to American anticommunists.

The importance of such explicit political commitments also speaks to the Russian revolution's place in the intellectual space of the New Negro. Indeed, as the *Messenger's* history suggests, the revolution was a central orienting point for debates over the future of the race. The example of the *Messenger* also illustrates that the history of the New Negro is not simply a history of cultural practices and interracial institutions, but one of explicit political contestation as well, in which varying forces vied for hegemony, often while simultaneously appealing to the example of the Bolsheviks to endorse their particular commitments. Given that the revolution was a moment in which masses of people self-consciously attempted to shape the world according to their political ideologies, it is only fitting that it serve to remind us of the importance of such attempts in our own history as well.

The Winding Path to Bolshevism: The *Crusader* in the Postwar Moment

Of all the New Negro outlets who saw in the Russian Revolution the promise of a better day for black Americans, the only one that ended up aligning itself with the American representative of that revolution, the Communist Part, was the *Crusader*. Edited by the Caribbean immigrant Cyril Briggs, the *Crusader* distinguished itself from its fellows by its combination of indomitable black nationalism and advocacy for socialism. To be sure, both ideologies were well-represented in New Negro print culture. But where Marcus Garvey purveyed a nationalism that went out of its way to avoid offending American state officials, particularly after his tour of the Caribbean in 1921, Briggs and the *Crusader* reveled in it, gleefully announcing “We Rile the Crackerized Justice Department” (“the source,” for those who wondered, “of all the crackerizing”). Similarly, Randolph and Owen's *Messenger* advanced a socialism that became progressively less militant after 1919, until the magazine became, in E. Franklin Frazier's words, “an organ chiefly devoted to advertising negro enterprises and boosting black capitalists.” The *Crusader*, meanwhile, took a sharp left in these years, moving from Wilsonian to proletarian internationalism. Eventually, this road would take it into the Communist Party.¹

1 “We Rile the Crackerized Justice Department,” *Crusader*, May 1920, 5-6; E. Franklin Frazier, “The American Negro's New Leaders,” *Current History*, April 1928, 58; Qtd. in Winston James, “Bring Red and Black in Jim Crow America: On the Ideology and Travails of Afro-America's Socialist Pioneers, 1877-1930,” in *Time Longer Than Rope: A Century of African-*

The decision to join the CP, made in mid-1921 by Briggs and other leaders of the African Blood Brotherhood, the organization built around the *Crusader*, was by no means an obvious one. At this point, the CP was an unmitigated disaster of internal factionalism, with little ability to affect the course of politics in the wider world. Moreover, Briggs' nationalist politics, which included advocacy of black emigration and occasional skepticism about the ability of socialism to solve the race problem, were not completely congruent with the CP's program. In light of these facts, how the *Crusader* ended up joining the CP has posed a problem of historical interpretation.²

For some time now, scholars have focused attention on the role played by the Communist International in bringing Briggs and his milieu into the party. The Comintern was formed in 1919 as means by which to orient the international socialist movement around the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and to spread that revolution to the rest of the capitalist powers. Of particular importance to the figures around the *Crusader* was the Comintern's declaration of alliance with anticolonial movements everywhere. Years later, Briggs would recall that his interest in communism "was sparked by its hostility to imperialism and specifically by the Soviet solution to the national question."³

American Activism, 1850-1950, ed. Charles M. Payne and Adam Green (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 373; Robert A. Hill, "General Introduction," in *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, ed. Robert A. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), lxxix-lxxx.

2 On early CP factionalism, see Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 176-267; Bryan D. Palmer *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 133-201.

3 The historiography of the ABB has exhibited an intense preoccupation with whether the ABB was formed before entering the CP, or was itself a project of the CP. Theodore Draper argued in the 1960s that the Brotherhood predated Briggs' joining the party, the position most historians now agree is correct. However, in his influential introduction to the first collected

While this explanation of the *Crusader's* trajectory grasps an important truth about its relationship to communism, it raises further issues of interpretation. Most importantly, if the Russian revolution and the actions of the Comintern were so decisive for the *Crusader*, why didn't the journal discuss them more? Indeed, even accounting for its shorter print run, the *Crusader* published less commentary on Russia than either James Weldon Johnson in the *Age* or Owen and Randolph in the *Messenger*.

This chapter will investigate this question by tracking the ideological formation of Cyril Briggs, the single most important figure at the *Crusader*. It will argue that while the historiographical emphasis on the Russian revolution's impact is correct, the nature of that influence is more subtle than has been appreciated. By carefully tracking the evolution of Briggs' thought, it demonstrates three points: first, that Briggs' early intellectual formation was deeply heterogeneous, drawing on Wilsonian liberal internationalism and genteel black nationalist traditions both. Second, it demonstrates that Briggs' relationship with black nationalism was more ideologically productive than scholars have recognized, as his engagement with Marxism produced unique political positions emphasizing the black "race genius" for communism. Second, the chapter shows that his ideological commitment to socialism was formed

full run of the *Crusader*, Robert A. Hill argued, on the basis of Briggs' recollections, that Briggs joined the party in 1919, rather than 1921 as was claimed by Draper. Winston James has shown, on the basis of painstaking investigation, that Draper was indeed correct: the ABB was founded in 1919, and Briggs and the ABB's leadership joined the CP in 1921. See Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 322-8; Robert A. Hill, "Introduction: Racial and Radical: Cyril V. Briggs, THE CRUSADER Magazine, and the African Blood Brotherhood, 1918-1922," in *The Crusader*, edited by Robert A. Hill (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987), xxiv-xxvi; Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1998), 160-3.

largely independently of an engagement with the revolution. In fact, the US Socialist Party was a more important influence on Briggs for most of the *Crusader's* existence. However, the SP, especially after 1919, gave Briggs no way to integrate his twin commitments to international black liberation and socialism. This is where the influence of the Russian revolution, and particularly the Comintern's national policy, came in. While not transforming Briggs' thought fundamentally, the revolutionary theory coming out of Russia gave him a way to integrate his main ideological commitments. The Comintern's vision, formed largely but not exclusively by Lenin, of movements of national self-determination acting in concert with workers' revolutions in the industrialized countries to eradicate capitalism on a global scale gave Briggs a political theory in which his commitments could be merged, rather than existing side by side. The SP furnished no comparable intellectual scaffolding. Ultimately, this is why Briggs and his associates joined the Communist Party.

This chapter will thus examine the arc of Briggs' intellectual history, beginning with the *Crusader's* first issues, and moving through the politics of race and radicalism developed at the journal. Special attention will be paid to Briggs' relationship with the SP and its effect on his political thought. Finally, it will consider the journal's engagement with Russia, and how it fit into Briggs' already-developed thought.

The Early Issues

The early issues of the *Crusader* are striking for their ideological

heterogeneity. Alongside the militant black nationalism for which the magazine is famous, there are articles moving in a number of different and opposed political directions. In the very same issue, Briggs could laud Woodrow Wilson for having “done more for the Negro than the whole Republican Party put together,” quote the Socialist Party's national executive committee on anticolonialism and self-determination in Africa, and run poetry praising C.J. Walker as an inspiring rags-to-riches story.⁴ Though scholars have taken note of the presence of such contradictory political impulses in the *Crusader*, neither their extent nor their intensity has been appreciated in New Negro historiography.

To comprehend how Briggs could simultaneously endorse anticolonialism and the American president, it is useful to place his writings in the context of the dynamics of black nationalism as an ideology. As scholars of black nationalism such as Dean Robinson and Wilson Moses have argued, black nationalism is an essentially indeterminate political form, capable of extensive ideological heteroglossia. In Moses' words, “Black nationalism assumes the shape of its container and undergoes transformations in accordance with changing ideological fashions.”⁵ Nineteenth century nationalists, for example, combined aspirations for a black nation with an admiration for upper-class Anglo-American cultural norms, frequently elevated to a universalist category under the sign of

4 Andrea Razafkeriefo, “Mme. C.J. Walker,” *Crusader*, December 1918, 18.

5 Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 10. Moses' formulation here has the defect of positing a unidirectionality to black-white cultural exchange. Dean Robinson, who has built on Moses' arguments to examine twentieth century black nationalisms, gives the argument a more felicitous phrasing when he argues that “Afro-American politics and thought and 'mainstream' politics and thought are *mutually constitutive*. To conceive of Afro-American politics and thought as separate from the 'mainstream' is to misrepresent both sets of phenomena.” Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6.

'civilization.' Such admiration could only be combined with nationalist aspirations by means of some conceptual alchemy, however, given the manifest role Anglo-American 'civilization' was playing in blocking the aspirations, nationalist and otherwise, of black Americans. The concept of uplift acted as regent in this mixture, allowing nationalists to identify a path for nationalist aspiration – the raising of the cultural, moral, and intellectual level of the black masses – that did not require a direct confrontation with Anglo-American civilization. As Kevin Gaines as argued, in nationalist discourse such a conception of black “backwardness” easily “led to attacks on other blacks whose perceived weakness – or lack of manliness – betrayed race ideals.”⁶

This relationship between black nationalism and dominant understandings of American civilization began to change in the early decades of the twentieth century, in no small part due to the actions of New Negro writers like Briggs. As World War I devastated Europe, an abiding admiration for the accomplishments of European civilization became more difficult to sustain. Similarly, colonial uprisings in places like Egypt and Ireland, and the development of a nationalist movement in India, provided models of group self-assertion that engaged in directly challenged European civilization. Such changes in the intellectual inspirations for black nationalism, however, do not disconfirm Moses' and Robinson's arguments. For Briggs in particular, the articulation of black nationalism present in the *Crusader's* early issues continued to display what Robinson has called “homologues in the broader political and

⁶ Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 102.

intellectual landscape.”⁷

The specific aspects of the landscape with which Briggs situated his thought were a kind of primordial racialism and a brief though significant adherence to a Wilsonian conception of self-determination. In the early issues especially, Briggs assumes a kind of naturalized racial Hobbesianism, where relationships between races were a war of all against all. Such a conception of race as a primordial organizer of social relations were common currency in early twentieth century America, as authors like Lothrop Stoddard, who Briggs would quote, developed whole theories of history based around the race concept. Wilsonianism, as a liberal vision of the international order, may seem a strange counterpart for such an ideology, but the two were actually deeply consonant. Wilson himself, after all, was no stranger to conceiving of history in largely racial terms. More importantly, however, Wilson's panegyrics on the national question provided Briggs with a framework for articulating his aspirations for pan-African liberation. The president's mobilization of rhetorics of self-determination appeared to Briggs to create space for the assertion of African and African American rights alongside those of the Poles, the Belgians, and the Serbs. Together, these ideologies seemed to both explain the current state of African-descended peoples the world over and provide the intellectual resources for changing that state.

Briggs' racialism manifested along two main lines: a conception of race as the primary organizing principle of society and history, and a castigation of 'backwardness' among black Americans. Throughout the *Crusader's* early issues,

⁷ Robinson, 3.

Briggs is insistent on the transhistorical nature of racial conflict. Racial antipathy, he argues, “is as old as the hills. It existed from the first ice ages between *Homo primigenius* and his more perfect development, *Homo sapiens*.” Elsewhere he emphasizes its geographical reach, encompassing “all times and countries of which there are any records.” In the United States specifically, he argues that racial antipathy derives from “hatred of the unlike – the white man's hatred for his racial opposite and and for any other types that are in any way different from his selected standard.” This hatred “finds strength and support in the partial decadence and almost complete submergence of Negro culture from the time Arabs over-ran North Africa and the Sudan.” The degradation of blacks in America by whites thus builds on their oppression by the Arabs, in a continents and centuries spanning drama of racial conflict.⁸

Though he saw race as a universal organizing principle of human society, Briggs also saw something unique in relations between the black and white races. While in Brazil “Indians, Negroes, and Latin races” could live side by side, “never before in history have [the black and white race] lived together on terms of peace and equality.” Indeed, the relations between these two races “have always been on the basis of slave and master, inferior and superior.” He repeats this assertion elsewhere. For Briggs, black and white represent a special case of the general theory of race, where the conflict between races must necessarily end in the enslavement of one of the two. So shall it continue “until the Millenium. . . But this is *not* the Millenium [*sic*].”⁹

8 “The Great Illusion,” *Crusader*, November 1918, 5; “The American Race Problem,” *Crusader*, September 1918, 12.

9 *Ibid*; “The Great Illusion,” 5.

Briggs' identification of the stakes in the struggle between black and white leads directly to his classically nationalist deprecation of the habits and mores of his racial fellows. After all, if failure in that struggle leads to enslavement, and the practices of black Americans were contributing to that failure, the urgency of combating such practices is clear. Briggs acted on this urgency, castigating the race for its failures in the face of white hostility. "A race less obtuse than ours," he argued, would never accept the lies whites told about Africa's supposed poverty and worthlessness, especially as the same whites were "flocking thither to dispossess the Black man of his soil." A piece by Anselmo Jackson, who would soon join the *Crusader's* board as an associate editor, was even harsher. Jackson argues forthrightly that the role of black Americans in perpetuating "race contempt" and "a lack of confidence...are far more injurious than the unjust and undemocratic attitude of the white man in dealing with Negroes." Jackson was particularly scornful of black leaders, whom he described as "Judas Iscariots who. . . unlike their patron saint, are conscienceless and lack the manliness and sense of shame to hang themselves." The invocation of manliness here is a classic trope in nationalist auto-disparagement, drawing on broader imbrications between gender ideology and ideals of civilization to identify black men's failures to fulfill their proper gender roles as a key cause of black backwardness. After moving on to discuss black failures to patronize black-run businesses and to defend the honor of black women, Jackson concludes that "although one is mindful of the attitude of white men toward Negroes – it is impossible to form any other conclusion than that the greater part of the black man's burden is himself." Jackson's reversal here of Rudyard Kipling's famous ideologeme of

“the white man's burden” is a familiar rhetorical maneuver in New Negro texts, as writers like Hubert Harrison and HT Johnson identified colonialism as the true burden of the race.¹⁰ Similarly, ED Morel's 1920 text of the same title would receive significant attention in New Negro publications, including the *Crusader*. Jackson, however, moves in precisely the opposite direction, sharing with Kipling an identification of African-descended peoples as a burden, but disputing who it is that is being weighed down.¹¹

Briggs himself would give voice to nationalist gender anxieties a few months later in his editorial on “Amalgamation.” Responding to William Stanley Braithwaite's advocacy of racial intermarriage as the solution to the race problem, Briggs pronounced advocates of amalgamation either “ignorant of its logical results or. . . lower than we ever have dreamed that human beings could be.” Briggs made the case against Braithwaite largely on grounds of racial realism, arguing that the only way such intermixing could occur would be through white men taking advantage of black women. Continuing Jackson's line of thought on the importance of protecting black womanhood, Briggs dismissed Braithwaite with the proclamation that “the Negro has not yet sunk so low as to be willing to see his women in such a role.” However, Briggs' case against amalgamation was not made solely in terms of the likely victimization of black women. Part of the reason such victimization would be the likely outcome, he argued, was that “[d]epraved as the white man is he rightly will not lend his women to such an

10 See H.T. Johnson, “The Black Man's Burden,” in *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903*, ed. William B. Gatewood, Jr. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 183-4; Hubert Harrison, “The Black Man's Burden,” in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, ed. Jeffrey B. Perry (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 62.

11 “The Truth About Africa,” *Crusader*, October 1918, 3; Anselmo R. Jackson, “The Black Man's Burden,” *Crusader*, October 1918, 9-10.

infamous scheme.” Apart from the way in which it would be carried out. Briggs clearly thought race-mixing in and of itself was a significant evil.¹²

In arguing thus, Briggs would carve out a significant area of agreement between himself and his famous rival, Marcus Garvey. For both, the politics of black nation-building meant strictly policing the boundaries of black sexuality and gender roles.¹³ The prominence of such conservative sexual politics in the ideology of both men testifies to the potency of the inheritance of classical black nationalism, a tradition whose anxieties over miscegenation go back to Martin Delany, and continue throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Similarly, Briggs' embrace of the anti-miscegenationist argument signals the importance an organicist concept of race held for him. His arguments on this front would have found ready assent from Alexander Crummell, or any of the other nineteenth century nationalists enlivened by Johann Gottfried Herder's theories of racial collectivism. The early issues of the *Crusader* thus represent a fundamental continuity with the politics of classical black nationalism.¹⁵

12 “Amalgamation,” *Crusader*, April 1919, 9. Interestingly, in the rest of the article, Briggs goes to great lengths to emphasize that intermarriage is contrary to the fighting spirit of the Negro race. He recounts the accomplishments of black antiquity, such as the pyramids, and the accomplishments of those who fought, like Toussaint L'Ouverture. Such a history provided a counterpoint to Braithwaite's proposal, which represented “the last shameful resort of the mentally crushed and hopelessly beaten.”

13 On the sexual politics of Garveyism, see Michele Mitchell, “‘What a Pure, Healthy, Unified Race can Accomplish:’ Collective Reproduction and the Sexual Politics of Black Nationalism,” in *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought*, ed. Adolph Reed, Jr and Kenneth W. Warren (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2010), 158-183.

14 On Delany and miscegenation, see Tommy J. Curry, “Doing the Right Thing: An Essay Expressing Concerns toward Tommie Shelby's Reading of Martin R. Delany as a Pragmatic Nationalist in We Who Are Dark” *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 9 no. 1 (Fall 2009): 18-19.

15 Minkah Makalani notices Briggs' articulation of a “gendered, racist worldview where blacks and whites were natural enemies,” but gives little sense of the flavor of this worldview, or how it situates Briggs in relation to his ideological predecessors. Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill:

Briggs' embrace of a Wilsonian vision of international relations is, on the other hand, rather more novel. Wilson was, after all, quite a racist, known for screening *The Birth of a Nation* at the White House. Yet Briggs was clear in his support for Wilson in late 1918 and early 1919, articulating his views on international politics in a Wilsonian register, and even praising the president's record on racial matters. Briggs was able to navigate such an apparent contradiction by way of Wilsonianism's dual character, consisting of a vision of an American commercial empire based on principles of self-determination. By mobilizing the latter, Briggs employed Wilsonian principles to ends, such as black freedom in the US and African self-determination, that their creator had scarcely contemplated.

Wilson's vision for an American empire had roots that hardly augured their uses for anticolonialists like Briggs. On a personal level, Wilson's ambition for American domination was based on his sense of the country's religious mission for global power. America was chosen, he believed, "to show the way to the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty."¹⁶ This notion of a national destiny originated in the national debates surrounding the Spanish-American war. In these debates, Wilson sided decisively with the partisans of American expansion. For Wilson, America's new colonial possessions would be doubly beneficial: under American tutelage, the peoples of these territories could be made ready for self-government, and this pedagogy itself would "restore unity of national purpose to the American people and government."¹⁷

University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 47.

¹⁶ Qtd. in Perry Anderson, "Imperium" *New Left Review* 83 (September-October 2013): 10.

¹⁷ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of*

Wilson's elevation of the American political system to a global model had repercussions far beyond what he intended. These hinged most crucially around the concept of “the consent of the governed,” around which Wilson based his prescription for the form of political sovereignty which would undergird a liberal world order. As American participation in World War I became increasingly likely, and Wilson assumed a more global role, this concept became foundational for his pronouncements on the conflict and its resolution. In formulating the concept, Wilson imagined he was doing little more than summarizing the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Yet in advancing such a concept as the basis for a new geopolitical order, and not merely America's unique heritage, he was providing political succor to anticolonialists the world over, who saw in Wilson's words a powerful intellectual resource for articulating their own projects. They responded accordingly, and Wilson soon found himself deluged with requests from anticolonial intellectuals, hailing from locales from Egypt to Korea, to take up the cause of their nations. In this context, Briggs' support for Wilsonianism on the world scale appears less peculiar.¹⁸

From the beginning, Briggs was keen to mobilize Wilsonian rhetoric behind the cause of black self-determination. In the very first article of the first issue, he announced the lines of argument which he would follow doggedly for the next few months. The Allies' victory in the war must, he argued, bring “Democracy for all the people – regardless of race, creed, or color.” This followed from two premises. First, the contribution colonial soldiers (such as Indians in

Anticolonial Nationalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 28.

¹⁸ Manela, 15-53.

the British forces, or Senegalese in the French) in the struggle against autocracy meant that democracy could hardly be denied them at home. Second, Wilson's pronouncements on the necessity of "the consent of the governed" as a principle of world politics were universally applicable, and contained no "foot-notes...to the effect that the principles he has declared are not applicable to all the branches of the human family." For Briggs, "a free Africa, as well as a free Poland, Serbia and Belgium" were "emphatically promised" by Wilson and the Allies.¹⁹

Yet as hard as Briggs tried to draw a straight line from Wilson's pronouncements to African self-determination, his writing also betrayed doubts that such a line would be traveled. After his recounting of Wilson's promises, the article goes on for an additional three pages arguing why self-determination for Africans must follow from Wilsonian premises. He focuses particularly on the familiar colonial apologia that superior peoples have the right to govern the inferior. Cannily, Briggs assimilates this line of argument to the proposition that "might makes right," precisely the principle the Allies were fighting against in their battle to expel Germany from Belgium. Proceeding from there, he attacks the argument that conquest civilizes the conquered, pointing to the examples of the Phoenicians and ancient Greeks to counter that "trade" is a more effective mechanism for the dissemination of civilizational virtues. Compelling as these lines of argument may be in the context of Briggs' general Wilsonian case for self-determination, however, their sheer volume implies that, although he sounded confident, Briggs was far from sure that African freedom would follow the Allied

¹⁹ "Africa for the Africans," *Crusader*, September 1918, 1.

victory.²⁰

These doubts did not prevent Briggs from acting as a devoted anticolonial Wilsonian, and seemed to diminish with time. In subsequent issues, he reaffirmed his commitment to American war aims, with the view that self-determination would be chief among them. Briggs continued to proclaim his faith that “the president is specifically including the oppressed peoples of Africa and Asia” in his visions of postwar settlements. Surveying black press coverage on the issue, Briggs noted with satisfaction that “this is generally the opinion of the Negro press.” More pointedly, Briggs was not hesitant to use the imagery of American war propaganda to support his arguments. In the first issue, the arguments about the “German” principle of might makes right are predicated on the assumption that the US was indeed fighting against such a principle. Briggs would regularly lean on the association between Germany and barbarism that was assiduously cultivated in the American mind, referring to “Hun dreams of 'Mittelafrika and world empire'” and describing lynchers as “The Huns of America.” Though in both cases, the association was mobilized for black liberation, it is nonetheless true that the force of Briggs' polemics were based on the same “100% Americanism” ideology that was also instrumental in justifying white supremacy in the United States.²¹

At times, Briggs could be quite forthright about his support for the American war effort. Though he had previously found trouble at the *Amsterdam*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ “The President's Speech,” *Crusader*, November 1918, 13; “The Truth About Africa,” *Crusader*, October 1918, 6; “The Huns of America,” *Crusader*, December 1919, 26. On 100% Americanism, see Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 122-158.

News for his critical remarks on the war, by the time he launched the *Crusader*, it appears that Wilson's rhetoric had allowed Briggs to find space for his own goals within the larger framework of American war aims.²² He urged readers to buy war bonds to “back [our boys] up in their struggle against Prussianism.” By ensuring the Allies would possess “a vast preponderance in shells and guns,” Briggs hoped that the issuance of war bonds would “demonstrate to the Hun the utter futility of his hopes for victory or even a draw.” Notably, such rhetoric placed situated Briggs as even more bellicose than some of Wilson's tamer offerings, which emphasized “peace without victory.” Elsewhere, Briggs sought to act as a sort of *pro bono* public relations agent for Wilson's administration, counseling the government on how it could best mobilize the black public behind the war effort.²³

During this period, the other *Crusader* writers also showed themselves invested in nationalist narratives of the sort Briggs employed during his Wilsonian phase. The poetry in the journal was particularly notable for its convergence with themes from the dominant forms of American nationalism. Vernon Ritchie's “The Widow's Sacrifice” offers an apostrophe to a soldier going to “heed Columbia's call.” Though pregnant with the possibility of loss, the poem's sentimentalism contains no critical edge. The widow is clear that her boy should go and “proudly fight.” No mention of the cause of the war is given, and the poem offers no resources for questioning it. Andy Razaf, who would later compose verse as militant as anything that would come from Claude McKay's pen,

²² For Briggs' *Amsterdam News* editorials, see Makalani, 37-8.

²³ “Buy War Bonds,” *Crusader*, October 1918, 7; “The Government's Opportunity to Tell Negroes of its War Aims,” *Crusader*, October 1918, 8.

was similarly inclined towards a sentimental American nationalism in the early issues. In his poem "Why I am Proud," which also articulates a kind of genteel nationalism consonant with Briggs', Razaf proclaims "My color stands for loyalty./The kind which is ne'er uncouth;/For a race which has given an 'Attucks'/But never an 'Arnold' or 'Booth.'" Developing a racial synecdoche, Razaf holds loyalty to the American state as a point of pride for his race.²⁴

Correspondence printed in the early issues reinforced the nationalism being advanced by the *Crusader* writers. In the first issue, a letter "from one who fights to 'make the world safe for democracy'" ran. Its author extolled the lack of discrimination in the military, and enthused over the possibility that black soldiers, trained in the use of force, would refuse the conditions imposed on them in the US after returning home. Keenly aware of the injustice of fighting for "men who may. . . burn or destroy the home and loved ones I am forced to leave," the author nonetheless offered an overwhelmingly favorable evaluation of black military service. Similar to Briggs, he was unhesitating in endorsing US war aims, proclaiming his desire to "whip the Kaiser and his gang of cutthroats!" Given that this was the journal's first issue, it is likely that Briggs solicited this letter. A few months later, the journal ran another letter, "With the Buffaloes in France," which focused largely on the theme of black loyalty. After lauding France for its lack of racism (he compares black soldiers entering France to Elijah entering Heaven), the author, Osceolo McKaine, goes on to describe black soldiers'

²⁴ Vernon Ritchie, "The Widow's Sacrifice," *Crusader*, September 1918, 27; Andrea Razafkeriefo, "Why I am Proud," *Crusader*, October 1918, 11. On Razaf, see William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 13-61

contribution in defense of the country's "honor, liberty, and peace."²⁵ For McKaine, American racism represented a failure to recognize just how American blacks actually were. Having lived for three hundred years in "glorious America," spending that time attending American schools and "serv[ing] its best families," the descendants of the slaves had become "thoroly [*sic*] Americanized...an integral and inseparable part of the Republic." Such an argument for the recognition of black rights foreclosed on any criticism of the American project, premised as it was on black loyalty to that project.²⁶

Briggs' enlistment of Wilsonian premises at times bled over into an outright championing of Wilson himself. He called Wilson's speech for the Fourth Liberty Loan, in which the president re-iterated popular sovereignty as the overriding principle of his political vision, "without a doubt the grandest human utterance in the history of mankind." Later, in December, after encouraging his readers, rather cryptically, to "find out the truth about Lincoln," an article announced that "President Wilson has done more for the Negro than the whole Republican Party put together." In light of the Wilson administration's record on race, this judgment seems extraordinary. Yet its very incongruence with the historiographical consensus on Wilson's dismal record on race reveals the profound importance Briggs placed on the impact of the president's speeches on self-determination. By advancing "the consent of the governed" as a principle of global politics, Wilson had, in Briggs' eyes, struck a blow for black self-

25 Here Briggs practices a form of what Brent Hayes Edwards has called "anti-racism in one country." Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6.

26 "Correspondence from One Who Fights 'To Make the World Safe for Democracy,'" *Crusader*, September 1918, 28; Lt. Osceolo E. McKaine, "With the Buffaloes in France," *Crusader*, February 1919, 3-4.

determination that far outweighed the president's considerable limitations on the home front. Indeed, for Briggs and other black Wilsonians, the president's championing of popular sovereignty had effectively given Jim Crow an expiration date, and the administration's support for segregation could hardly stop its approach.²⁷

In light of the apparent incongruity between Briggs' anticolonialism and profound embrace of Wilsonianism, it might be argued that his use of Wilsonian principles was purely tactical, reminiscent of Johnson's doubly-conscious rhetoric. Yet the evidence militates against such a judgment. For one thing, Briggs had just started his own publication after leaving the *Amsterdam News*, where he did indeed face pressure to compromise his views. Thus, in the *Crusader*, we should expect his views to become more uncensored, not more obscured. Even more importantly, as the level of governmental repression would increase over the course of 1919 and 1920, Briggs would become more aggressively radical, not less. If concern over repression were leading Briggs to affect a Wilsonianism he did not actually embrace, it is unlikely that an increase in repression would coincide with a repudiation of Wilsonianism, which is precisely the course the *Crusader* took in early 1919. Given all of this, and Wilsonianism's general currency amongst anti-colonialists, the most probable explanation of Briggs' enthusiasm for the president is that he really saw in Wilson a potential force for black self-determination.²⁸

27 "The President's Speech," *Crusader*, November 1918, 13; "Political Reflections," *Crusader*, December 1918, 9.

28 Other scholars have generally not noticed Briggs' significant embrace of Wilsonianism in late 1918. Minkah Makalani notes that Briggs wrote in the "Wilsonian moment," but avers that Briggs' "criticism of Wilsonian self-determination grew from a black anticolonial discourse."

Radicalization

Of course, Woodrow Wilson never intended his proposals for a postwar geopolitical order to bring popular sovereignty to the colonized regions of the globe. Briggs could hardly fail to pick up on this fact at the Paris Peace Conference, where Wilson showed little interest in taking up the concerns of the inhabitants of the French and British colonies. As the conference proceeded, Briggs quickly abandoned in his hopes in Wilson, and came to see the president as one more white ruler, committed to the suppression of colored peoples around the world. Briggs developed a stinging critique of the League of Nations, Wilson's signature proposal, as little more than a council for regulating the scramble for colonies and suppression of revolutions, and became a vocal critic of the practices of the American empire itself. His disenchantment with Wilson coincided with an increased orientation on the organizational and intellectual resources of the radical left. The Socialist Party and white workers came to replace Wilson as the key domestic forces that would support blacks in the struggle against racism. As such, Briggs also began to move away from, the primordial racialism so

This is true, but it elides both the way Briggs did indeed base his arguments for self-determination on Wilsonian premises, as well as the role Marxist conceptions of self-determination played in his later arguments. Makalani, 38. J.A. Zumoff notes Briggs' promotion of liberty bonds, but asserts that his patriotism was "feigned." The evidence for this reading is thin, given the publication of patriotic material from multiple authors, as well as the inverse relationship between the level of repression and Briggs' radicalism. See J.A. Zumoff, "The African Blood Brotherhood: From Caribbean Nationalism to Communism," *The Journal Of Caribbean History*, 41 (2007): 202. Michelle Stephens comes closer to the mark when she includes him among the "many black intellectuals who believed [Wilson's Fourteen Points] to be a real end to empire." Michelle S. Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 51.

prominent in the earlier issues of the *Crusader*. By the end of 1919, he had completely abandoned Wilsonianism and its attendant ideologemes, and moved decisively towards an alliance with the radical Left (broadly defined).

Though Wilson's prescriptions for global order had always foregrounded their idealistic dimensions, they had never lacked a healthy concern for national self-interest either. Alongside his sermons on America's tutelary role in global affairs, he had also motivated American hegemony on the basis of its pecuniary rewards. The advent of a world market meant that manufacturers would be looking abroad for profits, and their profits would have to be "safeguarded by ministers of state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process." Furthermore, Wilson argued that an energetic American presence on the world stage had the capacity to overcome the enervating effects of drift and regionalism in domestic politics, re-steel the American people with a sense of purpose appropriate to their national destiny. Never shy about explaining empire's alleged benefits to its subjects, he was also certainly aware of its rewards for its perpetrators.²⁹

These justifications for more traditional forms of geopolitical domination sat alongside a vision of the new sort of world order to be presided over by the American hegemon. As Neil Smith has described, "[w]ith capital accumulation increasingly outstripping the scale of national boundaries and markets...U.S. internationalism pioneered a historic unhinging of economic expansion from direct political and military control over the new markets." As the previous paragraph suggests, this does not imply the American state would hesitate to

29 Qtd. in Richard Seymour, *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (London: Verso, 2008), 98.

violate the sovereignty of other countries if the national interest required it. However, Wilson's vision of a liberal international order represented something genuinely new insofar as it no longer saw the permanent acquisition of foreign holdings as a default geopolitical dynamic. This shift, insignificant as it may seem in light of Wilson's adventures in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Russia, etc, was what allowed for a convergence between Wilsonianism and the desires of the anticolonialists.³⁰

At the same time, Wilson's commitment to a liberal world order ruled by the “advanced” nations sowed the seeds for the disillusionment experienced by Briggs, and ultimately the entire generation of postwar anticolonial intellectuals. Fundamentally concerned with forging a liberal Europe, he had little intention of providing redress to the representatives of the colonized world. The mandate system developed at the Paris Peace Conference reflected this lack of concern. Originally a proposal for the “internationalization” of locales like Central Africa, practical concerns dictated its evolution into a system of direct rule by the Allied nations. To anticolonialists like Briggs, this looked suspiciously like the old system of colonial dominance. A key breaking point came in April, when Wilson engineered the rejection of a racial equality clause the Japanese delegation had offered as an amendment. Concerned that settler-states like Australia would never join a League of Nations that included such a clause in its charter, as well as the resistance it would bring from Southern members of congress in the US, Wilson pronounced the amendment dead for lack of unanimous support. Doings

30 Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 142.

such as these made Wilsonianism a far less attractive offer for the wretched of the earth.³¹

Briggs' disillusionment with Wilsonianism took place relatively quickly, though stages can still be identified. Before turning directly on Wilson, he concentrated his polemics against the other European powers and American supporters of colonialism. At the very beginning of Peace Conference, Briggs inveighed against British ambitions to absorb the German colonies, sardonically noting that although "British statesmen have 'never wanted to enlarge the empire' . . . somehow or another it has suffered a constant enlargement." Significantly, in the same article, Briggs mentions that the British proposals followed "several feelers" on whether the United States would "reconsider her attitude in regard to undertaking territorial obligations in the backwards regions of the earth." Briggs' phrasing here is frustratingly ambiguous. On the one hand, he does not condemn the United States, while sparing no vitriol for the British advocates of empire. On the other, by noting that the "authoritative" British proposals for absorbing the former German colonies came after feelers to the United States, he seems to suggest that Wilson assented to the British proposal. Whether Briggs actually intended to condemn the United States for complicity in the British scramble, it is clear at this point that he reserved the bulk of his condemnation for the British.³²

Americans were not simply off the hook however, and a possible reticence to condemn the US government did not translate into a lenient attitude towards

³¹ Smith, 136-137; Manela, 181-182; Robert Lansing, *The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921), 243-56.

³² "Britain to Absorb as Usual," *Crusader*, January 1919, 6.

the citizenry. In the next editorial, Briggs attacked Theodore Roosevelt for a recent apologia for empire, in which the former president offered a full-throated defense of colonialism as the white man's burden. For Roosevelt, "the worst kind of foolish sentimentalist is the man who prates about freeing India or the Phillipines [sic]." Briggs condemned Roosevelt's "junkeristic" point of view, his choice of epithets revealing a certain continuing shared vocabulary with Wilsonian liberalism. He hoped Roosevelt's words would expose him to "even the most ignorant, besotted and servile of the race." Given the association of the black Republican machine constructed by Booker T. Washington with Roosevelt (who had made history by inviting Washington to the White House in 1901), this line can easily be interpreted as a familiar thrust against the Old Negro epitomized by Washington. However, given Briggs' earlier expressed contempt for the Republican Party, it is also possible that he intended a broader critique of black identification with the Republican Party.³³ In light of his contemporaneous enthusiasm for Wilson, this seems likely.³⁴

The next month Briggs raised the first real criticism of Wilson to come in the *Crusader*, nearly half a year after its first issue. The tone of the criticism was, at first, somewhat oblique. Testimony from a military intelligence officer had revealed that Wilson's denunciation of lynching in July of the previous year was motivated chiefly by a desire to counteract German propaganda among black Americans. Briggs related the testimony largely without comment. He prefaced it with the observation that "[i]t appears that the fellow of who they are not too

³³ "Political Reflections," 9.

³⁴ "Roosevelt and Africa," *Crusader*, January 1919, 6.

almighty sure is in better position to get a taste of the good things of life than the guy who is labeled 'harmless, won't go off.'" Not one of the snappier bits of prose to appear in the *Crusader*, the aphorism pointed to black discontent as a motive force for racial progress, eschewing reference to Wilson entirely. After relating the testimony, Briggs concluded that without German efforts to stir black discontent, "there probably would have been no denunciation from the White House against mob murder. That is certainly food for thought." This unusually gnomic editorial marks the first time any criticism of Wilson showed up in the journal's pages. Its obscurity suggests that Briggs' path away from Wilsonianism was more than the abandonment of a tactical pose, but a real shift in commitment.³⁵

Briggs was more direct when it came to his criticisms of the League of Nations. As the League was the primary institutional expression of Wilson's liberal internationalism, and as closely identified with Wilson as it was, Briggs' polemics against the League represented a further break with Wilsonianism. It was, however, a more indirect break than the outright denunciations which would soon follow. Briggs wasted no time in laying out his thoughts on the League. His first judgment on it states "the proposed League of Nations is designed not only to prevent wars between one nation and another, but to suppress all revolutions upon the part of the oppressed and dissatisfied; and also to bring about a division of the earth which the beneficiaries will agree upon and jointly support." The presence of revolution here is a noteworthy development. While Briggs could have been referring to events like the Irish Easter Uprising,

³⁵ "Food for Thought," *Crusader*, February 1919, 6.

the qualifier “on the part of the oppressed and dissatisfied” suggests a broader scope than rebellions against colonial domination, though of course these were rarely far from his mind. The Allied powers had, of course, worked together to suppress the Russian revolution in 1918, coordinating troop deployments and aid to the White armies. Though Briggs doesn't mention Russia specifically (the first mention of the revolution would come in the next month's issue, and there only in a brief drama review), the context suggests it was at least in his field of vision.³⁶

Briggs' main focus here, however, was on the League's role in perpetuating colonialism. He quickly disposed of the proffered justifications for the mandatory system, scoffing that “[t]he rank hypocrisy of [the claims to administer the territories for the benefit of the natives] is known to the most casual student of African affairs.” In place of this rationalization, Briggs offered a sophisticated account of the League's true purpose: to regulate the scramble for colonies. Suggesting an analysis of the origins of the World War similar to that developed by Lenin, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Hubert Harrison, Briggs noted that “[t]he exploitation of the of the darker races is becoming dangerous” for the colonizing powers themselves. In support of this argument, Briggs quoted a British lord who observed that such exploitation “is bound to lead to international difficulties” unless it is regulated. This was to be the task of the League, in Briggs' words, “to continue the old method of exploiting the weak peoples and yet prevent the old results when thieves quarrel among

³⁶ “The League of Nations,” *Crusader*, February 1919, 6.

themselves.”³⁷

In the next two issues, Briggs moved decisively to attack Wilson and the US empire. In a follow-up piece on the League, Briggs used a *New York World* article as his foil to continue his exposition of the League's nefarious character. Where the *World* held that “subject races are to be freed” through the creation of the League, Briggs queried how a league made up of “imperialistic England, greedy France, and land-hungry Haiti and the hypocritical murder of Haitian freedom” could be expected to offer anything to the subject races. The inclusion of Haiti in this list marks the first time the *Crusader* would offer an explicit criticism of the American practice of empire. Later in the article, Briggs expanded on the list of American crimes, including the occupation of the Dominican Republic and the Philippines and the annexation of Hawaii. He concluded with a demand for applying self-determination “to Mississippi and South Carolina and democracy to the South in general.” Here, Briggs forcefully links the questions of external colonialism and internal racial domination, a theoretical move that would become one of the *Crusader's* defining features.³⁸

Briggs' attack on American colonialism in the next issue would name Wilson specifically, offering some insight into the process of disillusionment the editor underwent as Wilson failed to live up the colonized world's hopes. After an editorial recounting the brutality of American Marines in the Virgin Islands, Briggs moved to confront Wilson straight on in an article called “A Discredited Man.” According to Briggs, while Wilson promised “genuine freedom” and

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ “If Only it Were True,” *Crusader*, March 1919, 10.

“world-wide democracy,” he made “no earnest effort” to deliver on these promises. For Briggs, the tragedy of such a abdication lay in the fact that Wilson “had the opportunity – as no man has ever before had – to make the world truly free.” This assessment of Wilson as possessing the ability, if not the will, to remake the world into one of genuine democracy testifies to the hopes Briggs had placed on the president. In the rhetoric of self-determination, a possibility for global emancipation had actually existed. Correspondingly, Wilson's failure to deliver on this promise amounted to the highest betrayal; world democracy had been blocked not by historical factors, but by the venality of one politician. One by one, Briggs listed the ways Wilson had broken his promises. The president promised a world free of empires while adding to the English empire. He brought the American people to war in the name of self-determination, only to set up “the damnable and hypocritical principle of the 'mandatory.’” And he promised an end to the principle of might makes right, all while defending the right of the European powers to hold possessions they had acquired simply on the basis of military prowess. In all of this, the intensity with which Briggs emphasizes Wilson's departure from his promises leaves little doubt that he was speaking of the president's discrediting in dimensions beyond simple public opinion.³⁹

At the same time, Briggs began moving away from the sentimental American nationalism that had been so prominent in the journal's early issues. In a piece entitled “Americans?” Briggs thundered against the attempt to win rights for Negroes simply on the basis of their American citizenship. Citizens, he

³⁹ “A Discredited Man,” *Crusader*, April 1919, 8.

argued, had rights that were protected by the state. Black Americans had no such protection, and thus, they could not be called American citizens “in the true. . . sense of the phrase.” Foreshadowing his later advocacy of emigrationism, Briggs declared himself eager to be deported to “my only motherland, the mother and inventor of all civilization – Glorious Africa!” He added only one stipulation: “it must be to a free Africa that I am deported.”⁴⁰

As Briggs developed a critique of Americanism, American empire, and the role the country had come to play in propping up the empires of others, the *Crusader* also began to show signs of developing a more radical perspective on a number of other issues as well. Prominent among these was a perspective on class, largely absent from the first few months of the journal's existence. While brief asides regarding class inequality and exploitation occasionally surfaced in those issues, they were never prominent, and always outweighed by more substantial excursions in the racialist vein discussed above.⁴¹ In the spring of 1919, however, class analysis came to occupy an important place in the *Crusader's* ideological space. In a discussion of deportation, Briggs drew an analogy between government plans to deport foreign-born radicals and the deportation of black strikebreakers brought north during the steel strike. He pointed out that the capitalists bringing black workers in to break a strike, and then sending them back south when their usefulness was exhausted were the same capitalists “who would send out of the country all workers who dare to talk against the system.” Briggs was explicit about the political lessons to be drawn from this fact - “In

⁴⁰ “Americans?” *Crusader*, June 1919, 5.

⁴¹ See, for example, “Predatory Landlords,” *Crusader*, December 1918, 6.

both cases the mailed fist of capitalism was aimed at the worker.” Capitalism, indifferent as to “whether it was a colored or a white worker that was to be exploited,” was colorblind. However, given the mutual ignorance and lack of concern between white and black workers, capitalists were only too happy to foment divisions between them.⁴²

The following month, Briggs took aim at capitalists who sought to portray themselves as friends of black workers. In the context of a nationwide strike wave in 1919, Briggs noted that capitalists (or “The Plutes,” as he refers to them here at times) were “turning to the Negro for protection of their ill-gotten loot in case of a conflict between capitalism and labor.” Supported by the “weakly” black press, capitalists were hoping to use black strikebreakers as leverage against striking white. Briggs was confident such schemes would come to grief, however, as the capitalists were forgetting “one little detail . . . the Negro race in America is almost wholly of the proletariat.” As such, black Americans had more reason to be dissatisfied with the system of capitalism, which exploited white and black workers in the US, as well as “the oppressed . . . millions of Africa and Asia.” For Briggs, the fact that black Americans were overwhelmingly working-class made it exceedingly unlikely that they would ever play the role the Schwabs and Rockefellers of the nation envisioned for them.⁴³

These articles are notable for reasons beyond the novelty of their class politics. Most strikingly, they appear not as fumbling moves towards an integration of class into the early analysis that emphasized racial conflict, but the

⁴² “Deporting Aliens and Negroes,” *Crusader*, April 1919, 10.

⁴³ “Out for Negro Tools,” *Crusader*, May 1919, 5.

appearance of more or less fully developed theories of the relation between race and capital. Indeed, they are remarkably congruent with the analysis of race presented in the *Messenger*, in which capital is held to be fundamentally colorblind, and divisions in the working class are simply cases of fighting the wrong battle. This congruence is unlikely to be accidental. In later interviews, Briggs recalled that many of his associates at this time, such as W.A. Domingo and Richard B. Moore, were members of the Socialist Party. The party's analysis of race appears to have made some impact on the racial politics of the *Crusader*. They did not fully displace the earlier raciological theories, but rather settled in to an uneasy coexistence with them, with lines of thought from both theories frequently making appearances in the following years. Nevertheless, the appearance of such stridently anti-capitalist pieces in the *Crusader* marks a turning point in the journal's ideological evolution.

At the same time that the *Crusader* was beginning to engage more with class radicalism, it was also, unsurprisingly, devoting more attention to the new Bolshevik government in Russia. Unlike James Weldon Johnson or the *Messenger*, the *Crusader* did not follow events in Russia closely. The first mention of the country appears only in March 1919, a full six months after the journal began publication. Even then, the article in question dealt primarily with a new play from Russia, and mentioned the revolution only in passing. In May, however, two pieces appeared making reference to the revolution. The first was a poem, published anonymously, and simply titled "The Bolsheviks." It contained a rather poetically stilted defense of the Bolsheviks against those who argue "They have turned the earth upside down," replying that "Upside down the world has

lain/Many a year;/We to turn it back again/Now appear.” Making no reference to any specific aspects of the revolution, the poem conveys a simple identification with the project of reversing the order of things then dominant.⁴⁴

In the same issue, Briggs published an editorial, entitled “High Rents and Bolshevism,” that dealt somewhat more directly with the revolution. The article was targeted at “landlords and real estate agents in Harlem” accused gouging black residents on rent. The avarice of this class, Briggs argued, would only “increase the converts of Bolshevism in that district.” As such, Briggs suggested that the landlords would do well to consider what might happen to them when “the Negro seeks relief in the class war of the proletariat against the conscienceless capitalists and makes common cause with the Bolsheviks of the world.” Here, the Bolsheviks appear as a warning to greedy landlords of what might happen if they continue the course they are on. In issuing such a warning, Briggs was anticipating a generation of future social democrats who would employ the example of the USSR to argue that reform was the only hope of staving off revolution. More interesting than this foreshadowing, however, is Briggs' specific vision of black Americans seeking common cause with the Bolsheviks. Eventually, this would become the political strategy with which Briggs would be most closely identified. Though it appears rather abruptly here, in light of Briggs' earlier political evolution, his turn to the Bolsheviks does not represent a sudden development. Briggs had clearly been concerned for some time to find allies in the struggle against white supremacy, looking first to the possibilities he saw in Wilson's rhetoric of self-government. Similarly, in the

⁴⁴ “The Bolsheviks,” *Crusader*, May 1919, 5.

previous month's issue, Briggs' linking of deportation campaigns against foreign-born radicals with repression against blacks implied the possibility of further alliances. With this kind of ideological formation, Briggs' decision to look to the Bolsheviks as possible allies is a logical next step.⁴⁵

Briggs' turn to Russia effectively marks the end of the journal's early issues, characterized as they were by considerable ideological heterogeneity. Though many of the themes explored in these issues, such as the durability of racial antagonism and the color-line's international character, would appear again in subsequent issues, others, such as the sentimental patriotism or hopes for support from a ruler like Wilson, would fade, to be replaced by a consistent combination of race radicalism, class radicalism, and internationalism. It is to the contours of this combination that we now turn.

Race Radicalism at the *Crusader*

Briggs' move towards a more fully coalesced political orientation did not mean that the *Crusader* ceased to combine ideological elements in novel ways. Indeed, the journal's (and later the African Blood Brotherhood's) combination of intransigent black nationalism with Bolshevism is responsible for a great deal of the historiographical attention it has received. In this section, I will discuss two less frequently discussed aspects of the journal's racial politics. First, I will

⁴⁵ "High Rents and Bolshevism," *Crusader*, May 1919, 4.

examine Briggs' continuing doubts about the viability of interracial alliances. Second, I will investigate Briggs' discussions of Africa, focusing specifically on his advocacy of emigration and his concept of primitive communism in Africa.

Briggs' racial politics remained the most heterogeneous aspect of his thinking throughout most of the journal's existence. While the primordial racialism so strongly emphasized in the early issues was complemented by assertions of the need for black and white workers together to oppose capital in this period, it never dropped out of view, and even received some novel articulations as Briggs engaged more fully with class radicalism. Most interestingly, in some formulations, Briggs is even *more* anti-white after he had begun to think more thoroughly about working class unity than he was before. In the same May issue (on the same page!) that he conjures the image of Negroes and the proletariat making common cause against the capitalists of the world, Briggs also published an editorial condemning the timidity of the NAACP in fighting racism both domestically and on the world stage. Briggs rooted this timidity in the fact that the association was "made up for the most part of white men and officered by white men." Briggs was unequivocal about the consequences of such an association, declaring that "No man can serve two masters. White men will find it impossible to forget that they are white. . . [t]hey will always be inclined to compromise on the just demands of the Negro." Noting the association's hesitancy to declare itself for the complete independence of Africa, Briggs pronounced it doubtful that the white people in it thought blacks were really their equals. While Briggs' hostility to the NAACP was familiar in New Negro polemic, his uncompromising insistence on the corrosive effect white

leadership had on the group's dedication to racial equality was a clearly nationalist note, obviously continuous with his earlier writings on the inevitability of domination between black and white. Published alongside his vision of a black-proletariat alliance, the editorial raises obvious questions of who Briggs imagined would constitute the proletariat in such a partnership. One possible interpretation is that Briggs' simply thought white workers were not actually part of the proletariat. The evidence suggests against such a reading. In the editorial on deportations, Briggs was clear that the "mailed fists of capitalism" would crush "a colored worker or a white worker" alike. More plausible is that Briggs was simply wrestling with a contradiction at this point; while enthusiastic about the possibilities of unity of purpose between the proletarian movement and the cause of black freedom, he was deeply skeptical about whites' fidelity to such unity.⁴⁶

The failure of white proletariat to oppose the colonialism of the capitalist powers loomed large among the reasons for Briggs' skepticism. Reacting to E. D. Morel's denunciation of the use of African colonial soldiers against Europeans, Briggs countered that France's use of conscripts from its colonial possessions was the fruit of the white proletariat's having been "a not unwilling factor" in "the imperialistic gambles of a Capitalist State." With a rich sense of irony, Briggs argued that this acquiescence paved the way for future defeats for the white workers of Europe, as "the horror on the Rhine" was but "a prelude to the use of African troops against the revolutionary proletariat of Europe." In their racial blindness, the white proletariat had "helped to furnish for the prolongation (at

46 "Word Protests," *Crusader*, May 1919, 4.

least) of its own slavery.” Though Briggs was caustic in his condemnation of white workers' failure to oppose colonialism, his argument also reveals the tensions running through his thinking. Far from arguing that white workers were the natural allies of white capitalists despoiling Africa, Briggs' argument suggested that white workers were undermining their own interests when they supported such efforts. If Briggs was pessimistic about the ability of white workers to act as consistent allies to the struggle for black liberation, he nonetheless pursued a social analysis which kept at least the possibility of such an alliance alive.⁴⁷

This analysis did not, however, displace Briggs' beliefs about the permanence of racial conflict. In the following months, these beliefs were expressed frequently in the pages of the *Crusader*. The summer of 1919 provided no shortage of such events, as the wave of race riots that swept the country that season lent gruesome confirmation to his arguments. Commenting on the riots in the September issue, Briggs reiterated his earlier statements on the permanence of racial domination. In all the time blacks and whites have lived together, he declared, “[o]ne or the other has always been the under dog.” He continued voicing this analysis in later issues, asserting the following summer that the basic problem was “the existence side by side of widely differentiated racial groups and the very human instinct which sets on the stronger group to tyrannize it over the weaker groups.” As this passage indicates, Briggs was far

47 “Africa and the White Proletariat,” *Crusader*, April 1921, 10. On Morel's article, see Robert C. Reinders, “Racialism on the Left: E.D. Morel and the 'Black Horror on the Rhine,’” *International Review of Social History* 13 (April 1958):1-28; Keith L. Nelson, “The 'Black Horror on the Rhine': Race as a Factor in Post-World War I Diplomacy,” *The Journal of Modern History* 42 (December 1970): 606-27.

from abandoning his earlier arguments about the organic nature of racial difference. At the same time, this article, entitled “At the Crossroads,” does introduce some new elements into Briggs' evaluation of the options in front of black Americans. Here, Briggs offers an assessment of how the developing socialist currents, whose relationship with the *Crusader* will be discussed below, might fit into the racial dynamic he describes. First announcing himself as “a Socialist. . . [just as] [a]ny intelligent Negro who gave thought to the matter would be,” Briggs then expounds on some reasons for skepticism about what socialism might deliver for blacks. He notes that the recent trend towards interracial unionism on the part of white workers was largely the result of “the extremities to which white labor had been forced by the use of Negro labor as scabs by the capitalists.” As such, no “Negro in his senses” could expect such solidarity to continue in a socialist society, where the pressures of capitalist exploitation would be absent. Far from socialism inaugurating an age of racial equality, as Randolph and Owen argued, its elimination of the prime impulse towards interracial unity would give free rein to the primordial instincts of racial domination he had described so many times. Intimating somewhat cryptically that he saw such processes at work already, Briggs hinted that, just as Christianity had been “perverted” to serve capitalism, “there are even now signs of perversion of the Socialist doctrines, both at home and abroad.”⁴⁸

The following year, Briggs would expand even further on these themes, re-

48 “Why Not 'Reform it Altogether?'" *Crusader*, September 1919, 11-12; Cyril V. Briggs, “At the Crossroads,” *Crusader*, June 1920, 12-13 and July 1920, 5-6. Of course, black radicals, most prominently Hubert Harrison and W.E.B. Du Bois, had criticized the Socialist Party in the past for its racism. However, given Briggs' evident enthusiasm for the SP in this period (discussed below), it is not clear that this is what he is referring to. His reference to perversions of socialism abroad is even less clear.

evaluating the possibilities offered by socialism to black liberation. In an editorial entitled “The Salvation of the Negro,” he offered an altogether more positive, though still guarded, assessment of the relationship between socialism and black freedom, while at the same time clarifying his arguments for black self-reliance. Briggs begins by revising, at least implicitly, the argument that socialism would eliminate the need for interracial cooperation, arguing that “while the oppression of one group by another is a necessary and ever present feature of Capitalism, such a thing in the Socialist Cooperative Commonwealth would be impossible.” To support this argument, he invokes the example of the Jews of Russia, who “found their salvation...in the destruction of the capitalist state in Russia. Along with capitalism went Jew-baiting.” As we have seen, this analogy between anti-Semitism and anti-black racism surfaced frequently in New Negro discussions of the revolution, though Briggs invoked it less than either Johnson or Randolph and Owen. In this context, however, it signals a clear move towards a more positive evaluation of the promise socialism held for blacks, particularly when compared with his more skeptical earlier writings.⁴⁹

This increasingly optimistic take on socialism did not mean Briggs was about to place all of his hopes in the class struggle. Alongside socialism, Briggs persistently argued for emigration from the United States, most frequently to Africa (specifically Liberia), but occasionally to South America or the Caribbean as well. These arguments appeared infrequently in early issues, becoming both more frequent and more articulated in issues following the Red Summer of 1919. In his discussions of emigration, Briggs explicitly framed his advocacy for it as a

⁴⁹ “The Salvation of the Negro,” *Crusader*, April 1921, 8-9.

response to the uncertainty of socialist revolution. In “At the Crossroads,” published in the summer of 1920, Briggs rejected the possibility outright of a “peaceful just and honorable solution” to the race problem, arguing that its possibility “is not sufficiently strong to warrant our staking the future of our race and children upon it.” As such, emigration to either Liberia or South America was the safest route to racial redemption. Interestingly, in light of his later endorsements, Briggs preferred South America to Africa at this point. While Africa had the virtues of both “sentimental attachment and strategic requirements,” Liberia, the only country in Africa to which Negroes could plausibly emigrate, was “not sufficiently developed industrially to be able to take care of any large influx of immigrants,” and was “cursed with disease-breeding mangrove swamps.” South America, by contrast, was just as vast as Africa, but already industrially developed. Emigration to it could represent “not only an escape from galling and degrading serfdom, but. . . a glorious and proud future as well.” A year later, in 1921, Briggs was more sanguine about the possibilities socialism held for black freedom. He still noted that while the strategy of black liberation through socialism had the advantage “of offering the most complete salvation since saving [*sic*] not only from alien political oppression but from capitalistic exploitation by members of [our] own group as well,” emigration also offered benefits, namely ensuring that a black minority would not “always be dependent on *the state of mind* of the majority.” Now, however, Briggs was willing to hedge his bets and endorse both strategies, declaring “the surest and quickest way. . . to achieve the Salvation of the Negro is to combine the two. . . propositions.” Though the *Crusader* was far from alone among New Negro

publications in advocating a return to Africa, both its grounds for doing so and hopes for what it would accomplish differed from other advocates of emigrationism, most notably, Marcus Garvey's UNIA. These differences reflected Briggs' growing engagement with Marxist politics, even as the force with which he advocated emigration called attention to his continued, deeply-held nationalism.⁵⁰

Emigrationism and Liberia both appeared infrequently in the *Crusader's* early issues, reflecting Briggs' confidence at the time in the possibilities of Woodrow Wilson's presidency. Before Red Summer, only two articles discussed Liberia in any depth. The first came in December 1918, in a brief notice reprinting a press release from the Methodist Episcopal church. Briggs noted that only the *New York Call* (the SP paper) and the *Post* had consented to print the statement. It concerned the postwar settlement in Africa, and asked that Liberia be awarded land that England and France had taken from it in the scramble for Africa. Since then, relations between the colonial powers and Liberia had been “not very cordial,” but the statement forecasted an improvement in relations after Liberia entered the war on the Allied side, desiring “to stand by America in all things.” Briggs offered little commentary on the statement, simply noting that Liberia was extending the principle of self-government to Africa. Despite his brevity, Briggs' interest in the statement is easy to discern. Self-government for Africa was central to his hopes for the post-war settlement, and Liberia's entry into the war on the American side could only reinforce his belief that the Allies meant what they said about self-determination.

50 Cyril V. Briggs, “At the Crossroads Part II,” 5-6 ; “The Salvation of the Negro,” 8-9.

In light of future advocacy for Liberia, however, it is interesting that the editorial says nothing specific about Liberia, or emigration there by black Americans.⁵¹

Briggs offered a more detailed appraisal of Liberia in February, when the *Crusader* responded to a *Chicago Defender* article dismissing emigrationism. The *Defender* portrayed emigrationism as little more than a fantasy of the worst classes of blacks, who, if they should improbably succeed in their endeavor, would accomplish little more than becoming “regular village cutups without let or hindrance” from whites. Incensed, Briggs responded at length. He began by invoking the powerful states of the African past, like Songhai and Benin, arguing that anyone familiar with such a past could hardly believe that black self-government would result in the anarchy the *Defender* implied. The black states of the present, Haiti and Liberia, offered similar evidence, having “produced great administrators and diplomats who can be favorably compared with the leading European statesmen.” In short, the legacy of black self-government was one of proud accomplishments, as far as imaginable from the nation of razor-wielding roustabouts portrayed by the *Defender*.⁵²

Briggs' second line of argument focused on the impact a strong state to which American blacks could emigrate would have on the status of the race as a whole. In countering the *Defender*, Briggs calls attention to the durability of white supremacy in the US, and the numerical weight of white society against its black counterpart. Escaping to Africa in these circumstances, he argued, was not giving up the fight, but rather taking to the only terrain on which black

⁵¹ “Socialists and Liberians Demand a Free Africa,” *Crusader*, December 1918, 14.

⁵² “Would Freedom Make Us Village Cutups?” *Crusader*, February 1919, 15-16.

Americans could wage it. Moreover, since “the status of one section of the race surely affects the status of all other sections,” creating a strong state in Africa would have salutary effects on the lives of those who chose to remain in the United States. The spectacle of a black state enjoying “an independent nationality” and “all the other rights of men” would demonstrate “afresh to the world the Negro's ability to govern himself.” Emigrationism not only restored a proud African past; it created a future for the race as well.

These two lines of argument, of praising the accomplishments of African society and arguing for the impact a free black state in Africa would have on the color line worldwide, formed the main pillars of the case for emigrationism made in the *Crusader*. In pursuing the first of these arguments, Briggs participated in the rhetorical strategy Jeannette Eileen Jones has labeled “Brightest Africa,” which sought to counter the racist portrayals of African society that circulated in mass media with narratives of a continent with a glorious past and promising future. Briggs' efforts to give an alternative portrayal of Africa soon came to center on Liberia, the country where his efforts to promote emigration eventually settled. In the pages of the *Crusader*, Liberia appeared as a paradise, home to “matchless opportunities.” There, the “slightest effort with the rude hoe is crowned with exuberant abundance.” Not only manual laborers would be so rewarded. Merchants, Briggs claimed, received profits of “not less than 100 per cent on the purchasing price, and 150 per cent, on the selling price.” This effusive portrait of the Liberian economy was matched by passages emphasizing the country's natural beauty. Briggs waxed rhapsodic describing the country, praising its “lakes and silver streamlets...fields of waving grain, and springs

gushing from a thousand hills.” In describing the geography, Briggs also took aim at the Euro-American image of Africa as a land of sickness and decay, boasting that “Liberia is just as healthy as South Carolina. . . Any man who comes here from the States and can't stand the climate is sick already before he comes. Only lazy, weak-minded people get sick and die.” For Briggs, Liberia was a land where black manliness could assert itself, setting an example for the race everywhere. In emphasizing the country's natural beauty, as well as its supposed emptiness, which Briggs never failed to note when encouraging emigration, these descriptions of the country recapitulated standard colonialist tropes about empty lands and redeeming settlers. Though Briggs' vision of Liberian emigration had important differences with that of Marcus Garvey, his boosterism for the country dovetailed with Garvey's vision of Africa as the stage on which Afro-American manhood would be redeemed.⁵³

This redemption, in turn, would propel the race as a whole into a new era in world history, a process on which Briggs' second line of argument for emigration focused. Briggs argued that the example of a free black state in Africa, peopled by both indigenous Africans and black American settlers, would go far in the struggle to overturn white supremacy. Fundamentally, Briggs argued that emigration to Liberia would lead to “*the creation of Negro power.*” The example of a strong black state would cause “bars now raised against us [to] automatically

53 Jeanette Eileen Jones, “‘Brightest Africa’ in the New Negro Imagination,” in *Escape from New York : The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem*, ed. Davarian Baldwin and Minkah Makalani (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); C. Valentine, “Liberia, the Open Door the Liberty and Power,” *Crusader*, November 1919, 23-24. “A Liberian Invitation,” *Crusader*, December 1919, 29. On the linkages between colonialism and visions of empty land, see William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 69-90.

collapse overnight.” With the same effusiveness with which he had praised Liberia's beauty and resources, Briggs declared that emigration represented a way of “solving the race problem” that was “at once efficacious, permanent, and honorable.” Discussing the South American option, Briggs argued that a “strong Negro state” on the continent would provide “racial inspiration” to Africa, “certain to influence [Africans] to unite and offer the most determined opposition to European domination.”⁵⁴

To demonstrate this argument, Briggs frequently turned to an analogy with Japan. Once more invoking a grand historical vision, Briggs argued that there were “two main roads. . . by which races have attempted to attain the universally-desired state of security against alien possession and attack.” The first road represented the attempt to gain security through “the accumulation of wealth and knowledge,” while the second looked to “the accumulation of armament and trained man-power.” Travelers of the first road were represented by the Jews, who had been “eminently successful in the accumulation of both wealth and knowledge.” Despite this success, Jews remained “the object of countless pogroms and other injustices in most of the European countries,” while being “merely tolerated” in countries like the United States. Japan represented the starkest possible contrast to this fate. By building a strong state, specifically a strong military, the Japanese secured for themselves the same knowledge and wealth the Jews had accumulated, as well as “national security and prestige.” Briggs acknowledged that this road had come with some costs; Japan was indeed

⁵⁴ Valentine, “Liberia, the Open Door to Liberty and Power”; “Africa for the Africans,” *Crusader*, October 1920, 8; “The Hour of Solution,” *Crusader*, November 1919, 8; Briggs, “At the Crossroads, Part II,” *Crusader*, July 1920, 6.

“hated by many of the white nations,” but for Briggs, this hatred itself represented a kind of victory, lacking as it did “the scorn” of white hatred for Jews and darker races. The white nations may have hated the Japanese, “but they fear and respect them as well.” With “a million [Negro] immigrants,” Liberia could evoke such emotions as well, coming to “occupy in Africa a position similar to that which Japan occupies in Asia.” When such a position was attained, the result would be “world-wide respect for the Negro race” and “the foundations for the complete redemption of the Fatherland.”⁵⁵

Briggs' arguments for emigrationism shared some important commonalities with the more well-known position advanced by Marcus Garvey and the UNIA. As noted above, both could, at times, evacuate Africa of its specificities, treating it as little more than the natural raw material for a new black empire. There were also important differences. Most importantly, despite the *Crusader's* earlier forays in a discourse of uplift that blamed black Americans for the oppression they suffered, Briggs never gave any succor to the idea, common in American emigrationism from the nineteenth century on, that Africans were in need of civilizing by their Afro-American fellows. In contrast, Garvey's vision of a redeemed Africa rested firmly on the foundation provided by what he called “the civilized Negroes.” For Garvey, the European domination of Africa was possible because “we of the Negro race have slept for hundreds of years.” In the meantime, the industrious races of Europe had passed the Negro

55 C. Valentine, “On the Wrong Road,” *Crusader*, March 1920, 11; “Liberia, the Open Door to Liberty and Power.” See also “Africa for the Africans,” 8. On black views of Japan more generally, see Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism, 1895-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Reginald Kearney, *African American Views of the Japanese: Solidarity or Sedition?* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

by. To redeem the race, the most advanced sections of it, whose definition closely coincided with Euro-American standards of “civilization,” would have to organize it into “one grand racial hierarchy. . . [forming] a Racial Empire upon which “the sun shall never set.” The UNIA's original list of goals, formulated in 1914, specified who would be at the bottom of that hierarchy, committing the organization to “assist[ing] in civilizing the backward tribes of Africa.” Garvey's plan for racial redemption thus represented a continuation of what Michele Mitchell has described as a *fin de siecle* enthusiasm for empire as a device for the redemption of black manhood.⁵⁶

Briggs' vision for African redemption employed some of the same tropes as this body of thought, particularly the notions of an empty continent and resettlement as regeneration of racial manhood, but was most noteworthy for his theory of primitive communism in Africa. Drawing on the account of hunter-gatherer societies found in Marx and Engels, Briggs argued that traditional African societies were a species of communism, and evidence of a black “race genius” for communism. In so arguing, Briggs forged a new conceptualization of

56 Marcus Garvey, “Address to the Second UNIA Convention, New York, August 31, 1921” in *African American Political Thought, 1890-1930: Washington, Du Bois, Garvey, and Randolph*, ed. Cary D. Wintz (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 223; Garvey, “Africa's Wealth,” in Amy Jacques Garvey, ed. *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, Vol 2 (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 64; Garvey, “African Fundamentalism,” in *Marcus Garvey and the Vision of Africa*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 158; Qtd. in Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 30; Michele Mitchell, “The Black Man's Burden: African Americans, Imperialism, and Notions of Racial Manhood, 1890-1910,” *International Review of Social History* 44 (December 1999): 77-99. On Garvey and the UNIA's attempts to colonize Africa, see Theodore G. Vincent, *Black Power and the Garvey Movement* (Maryland: Black Classics Press, 1970), 143-51; Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the United Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), 110-50; Stein, 108-27, 209-22; Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The United Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927* (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 2007), 150-60; and Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 160-216.

the place of Africa in the struggle for black freedom, quite distinct from contemporary New Negro mobilizations of anthropology or ideas about Africa.

As a concept, primitive communism arose in Marx and Engels' reading of the early anthropologist Henry Lewis Morgan. In the mid-nineteenth century, Morgan had studied indigenous American peoples of the upper Midwest and Canada, and on the basis of discovering similarities between modes of social organization there and elsewhere in the world, had developed a theory of human social evolution as proceeding through three stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization. Marx and Engels had, since the 1840s, worked out their own theory of historical evolution, centered on progressive forms of the organization of production. When Morgan's *Ancient Society* was published in 1877, the pair welcomed it as a confirmation of their theory. It also provoked in them, however, a reconsideration of the importance of traditional societies. Morgan had argued that primitive societies were characterized by an intense egalitarianism, which he named "communism in living." In these societies, land and other productive assets were held in common, and the fruits of labor were shared. While Marx and Engels had paid little attention to societies lacking class divisions previously, they saw in Morgan's anthropology not only an additional stage of history, but a basic confirmation of their arguments for the impermanence of class inequality.⁵⁷

For Briggs, primitive communism not only provided historical warrant for

57 For an explication of the concept of primitive communism, see Richard B. Lee, "Demystifying Primitive Communism," in *Civilization in Crisis: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Christine Ward Gailey (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), 73-94. On primitive communism in Marx and Engels, see Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1968), 217-49; and E.J. Hobsbawm, "Introduction," in Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 9-65.

his hopes of transcending capitalism; it also provided a way to redeem African society by placing it at the forefront of what he considered the most progressive movement in history. Though he discussed “communist” societies in Africa on multiple occasions, he never explicitly referenced Marx, Engels, or Morgan, or indeed even appended the term “primitive” to the communism he described. Moreover, Briggs quotes explicitly from a book by E.D. Morel, the British journalist, making the argument that African social systems are socialist. Nonetheless, there are reasons for thinking that Briggs was familiar with the Marxist concept of primitive communism, and applying it to Africa. Briggs was, at the same time he was writing these pieces, reading more deeply in Marxist theory. In 1919 he had explicitly referenced, and urged his readers to look at, Marx's explication of his economic theory, *Value Price and Profit*. An English translation of Engels' *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, the text where the concept of primitive communism was most discussed, had been written by SP intellectual Ernest Untermann in 1902, and would have been available to Briggs. Furthermore, discussions of primitive communism were not at all uncommon in the Socialist press, though there the idea often mixed with racist SP evolutionism. Throughout the life of the *Crusader*, Briggs revealed himself to be avid reader of the SP press, and it is not unreasonable to think he would have encountered the concept there. The most important evidence suggesting Briggs' familiarity with the idea of primitive communism, however, is simply his use of the word “communism” to describe African society. As Richard B. Lee points out, while early twentieth century anthropologists often agreed substantively with Morgan's portrait of “communism in living,” they were “not

necessarily accepting of his use of terms.” Given this, Briggs' decision to describe African society as communist, (as opposed to socialist, except for early on), and his familiarity with the Marxist and Socialist press, suggests that his analysis of Africa was indeed influenced by the idea of primitive communism.⁵⁸

Though never the subject of an extended discussion, Briggs used the idea of primitive communism in Africa to advance a number of arguments, from polemicizing against Marcus Garvey to countering racist depictions of the continent. The first time the notion of an egalitarian economy in Africa was raised was in March 1919, early in the *Crusader's* existence. In an article on Basutoland (today Lesotho) in South Africa, Briggs briefly described its government as “an admixture of patriarchalism and socialism. Land is divided on the communal principle, and is inalienable.” Beyond that, he gives no elaboration on what this might mean. A few things can be gleaned from this brief passage, however. First, throughout the piece, Briggs' goal is to paint a positive picture of Basutoland, as an example of successes possible when Africans are allowed to govern themselves. As such, his description of a combination of patriarchalism and socialism is almost certainly intended positively. Second, and relatedly, what exactly Briggs means by socialism is unclear, given the term's use

58 Cyril V. Briggs, “Andrew Carnegie – Fiend or Angel?” *Crusader*, October 1919, 13; Lee, “Demystifying,” 77. Elsewhere in the *Crusader*, Briggs makes explicit reference to capital as a “stage of development,” a phrasing going back directly to Morgan and Engels. See “What is Capital?” *Crusader*, December 1919, 11. Mark Pittenger discusses Morgan's influence on American socialists in Mark Pittenger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 169-71. For examples of discussions of primitive communism in the SP press, see. Philip Ehrlich, “Evolution of Property,” *The New York Call*, Sunday, August 31, 1913, 14; Rev. Charles H. Vail, *The Socialist Movement* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1902), 25. As Robin D. G. Kelley notes, Edward Wilmot Blyden anticipated this line of argument, also discussing the importance of communal forms of property in Africa. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 23.

to describe everything from the Soviet state to municipal ownership of industry. Finally, and most significantly, this piece is significant for its describing an African economy as “socialist.” Every subsequent reference to African egalitarianism would label the system “communist.” As Briggs' engagement with socialist thought was far less extensive at this point than it would be later, it is possible that his use of the term socialist to describe the government of Basutoland reflects his lack of familiarity with the idea of primitive communism, and his later terminological shift reflected his learning of the concept.⁵⁹

The next year, Briggs elaborated somewhat on his description of communism in Africa, using the idea to redeem the continent from the colonialist image of a land of stagnation and savagery. In the context of explaining what was meant by the slogan “Africa for the Africans,” Briggs argued that it did not “necessarily mean that African development [after independence] would be along capitalistic lines. . . whenever [African] peoples have had opportunity for independent development their particular race-genius has led them into the sphere of what. . . are today known as Socialism and Communism.” Briggs also took care to note that “both [were] in application in Africa for centuries before they were even advanced as theories in the European world.” Briggs' argument for an African “race-genius” for communism stands out, especially in light of his primordialist view of racial characteristics. If capitalism was the race-genius of the whites, which Briggs at times suggested with lines like “wage slavery, gruesome child and camp follower of caucasian civilization,” the race-genius of the African race-genius was the exact opposite, influencing the race to develop

59 Cyril V. Briggs, “Basutoland: The Hope of the Black Race,” *Crusader*, March 1919, 4.

naturally towards communism. Additionally, Briggs' emphasis on the antiquity of African communism, in contrast to its European counterpart, is quite clearly aimed at the image of a backwards continent. Far from being a land of stagnation, Briggs suggests, Africa is a place where what is newest and most modern and Europe is already centuries old. In Jeanette Eileen Jones' terms, "Brightest Africa" was a communist Africa.⁶⁰

As the context above suggests, Briggs frequently raised the idea of African communism in conjunction with his discussions of emigration as a political strategy. In these settings, the idea formed a bridge between his increasing commitments to anti-capitalism and his nationalist sentiments. As we have seen, Briggs remained skeptical about the white proletariat's reliability as an ally, leading him to advocate emigration as a guarantee of black autonomy. Building on this, the argument for a black race-genius for communism gave Briggs a way to combine emigrationism with anti-capitalism. This is explicitly the case in "The Salvation of the Negro," discussed above. In the midst of his argument there concerning the practicability of emigration in light of the uncertainty of socialism, Briggs argues that the virtues of the socialist solution to the race problem – the elimination of all forms of exploitation – are possessed by emigration as well. "[O]ur leaning towards communism," visible "wherever the race genius has had free play" would ensure that a free black state would also be one free of "capitalistic exploitation." The "existence of Communist States in Central Africa" was proof positive of this race-genius. For Briggs, the idea of a traditional African

⁶⁰ "Africa for the Africans," *Crusader*, October 1920, 9; "Wage Slavery in the West Indies," *Crusader*, September 1919, 9.

communism allowed him to posit emigration as an impeccably anti-capitalist political strategy.⁶¹

The idea also proved useful as a weapon in Briggs' struggle with Garvey, one of the central conflicts of the New Negro movement. Though initially supportive of Garvey's militant racial politics, Briggs quickly grew to despise his Jamaican rival as a fraud and a sell-out. High on Briggs' list of complaints about Garvey's politics was the latter's paternalism towards Africa. As discussed above, Garvey was an enthusiast of the notion of black Americans and "civilizing" Africa with their superior culture. In keeping with this orientation, Garvey declared himself Emperor of Africa. Briggs took special aim at this indulgence, declaring he would not fight for "an Africa whose white capitalist-imperialist bonds have been exchanged for the capitalist or feudalst [*sic*] bonds of a *Negro* potentate, with a piratical court and an antiquated system of knights, lords, and other potential parasites upon the Negro workers." What Briggs desired was "an Africa which the workers shall control, and shall produce wealth for themselves." Such an Africa existed "before the misfortune of the white man's presence. Briggs declared his vision of a free Africa in keeping with "the native system of Communism," which "still exists in certain inland territories where white rule is only nominal." In this argument, the idea of African communism did important work for Briggs. It allowed him to paint Garvey, for all his race-pride, as an adversary of the native African system of government, and implicitly cast Garvey as an adjunct of the white colonialists who sought to destroy that system. This was an especially important move for Briggs, whom Garvey delighted in mocking

61 "The Salvation of the Negro," 8-9.

for his light skin with suggestions that he was not a real Negro. With the idea of African communism, Briggs was able to turn the tables on Garvey, arguing that it was the UNIA leader who was betraying the race with his hierarchical vision of a free Africa.⁶²

Fierce as Briggs' struggle with Garvey was, however, the *Crusader* editor always reserved most of his energies for the struggle against colonialism and white supremacy. Here, too, he found use for the idea of African communism. In the same article in which Briggs assessed white proletarian guilt for complicity with colonialism, he listed as among its particular crimes acquiescence "in the destruction of many an African Communist state." He goes on to suggest that white workers read E. D. Morel's *The Black Man's Burden*, which gives "some excellent comparisons between African Communist states and Soviet Russia," before quoting at length from Morel, who argues that Russia, "the most advanced form of European Socialism now available to study, approximates closely to the social conditions of an advanced tropical African community...the corporate character which the Soviet system imparts to all economic activities is substantially identical with the African social system." Note that even when discussing Morel's account, Briggs uses the word communist, suggesting Briggs did not simply take the concept wholesale from Morel. More broadly, Briggs mobilizes the idea of African communism here as part of his general case against the white proletariat, furthering his argument that their support for colonialism was ultimately undermining their own class interests. While white labor across

62 "A Free Africa," *Crusader*, October 1921, 8-9. For background on the conflict between Briggs and Garvey, see: James, *Holding Afloat*, 145-46; Stein, 141-44, 190-192; Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, 62-4; Martin, 240-3.

Europe and America pledged its support for the workers government of Russia, it had itself participated in the destruction of just such a form of government in Africa. The next month, Briggs again invoked the spectre of communism in Africa, this time in the context of a discussion of the Congolese revolt against Belgian rule. Mocking colonialist claims that the revolt was all due to the belief of “credulous natives” in the power of charms, Briggs retorted “[w]ould it not be likely that tribes which hitherto existed under a system of Pure communism would find strongly objectionable such a horrible affair as the Capitalist System – against which even white workers are now protesting and objecting?” He closed with reference once more to the white workers of the world, wondering whether they would “accept such a puerile explanation of the Congo Revolt as is now offered by the Belgian Bourgeoisie? Or will they, remembering the explanations that are offered for *their* revolts against the master class, look further for the cause of the Congo Revolt?” The similar context of these two appearances of African communism suggest that Briggs felt the concept had a role to play in his arguments for white workers to take up the cause of anti-colonialism. By highlighting the communist nature of African society, in the midst of “an awakening class-consciousness among the workers of the world,” Briggs would have reason to believe his argument for interracial solidarity could succeed where the arguments of others had failed.⁶³

In viewing African societies as exemplars of primitive communism, Briggs placed himself outside of the main lines of New Negro thought in several respects.

63 “Africa and the White Proletariat”; “Belgium ‘Explains’ the Congolese Revolt,” *Crusader*, May 1921, 12-13. Aside from the one Briggs quotes in this article, there is another short reference to African socialism in the book in the context of a discussion of African social organization. E.D. Morel, *The Black Man's Burden* (Manchester: The National Labor Press, 1920), 200.

On a methodological level, Briggs' arguments for actually-existing communism in Africa differed sharply from the main lines of anthropological thought drawn on in early twentieth century black modernism. As scholars have recognized for some time now, a great deal of New Negro cultural production, from Alain Locke's essays to Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographies, came out of an engagement with Boasian cultural anthropology. A key figure in the development of American anthropology, Franz Boas (and later his students) developed a critique of the dominant, often Social Darwinist, schools of anthropology, arguing instead for a view of human societies that emphasized cultural diffusion. Boas was also a staunch egalitarian, and was stridently critical of the racism that pervaded the discipline. In criticizing theories that ranked human cultures as different stages on a universal developmental ladder, the Boasians were also highly critical of Morgan's schema, and with it, the idea of primitive communism. Part of this line of critique was, in fact, political. As Marvin Harris comments, when "Morgan's scheme became identified with Communist doctrine, the struggling science of anthropology crossed the threshold of the twentieth century with a clear mandate for its own survival and well-being: expose Morgan's scheme and destroy the method on which it was based."⁶⁴

Briggs' status as an outsider in the New Negro discussion of anthropology

⁶⁴ Harris, 249. For the relationship between Boasianism and New Negro intellectual history, see George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap University Press, 1995), 62-77; Mark Helbling, *The Harlem Renaissance: The One and the Many* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 19-67. Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to New Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 99-167. On the Boasian critique of Morgan, see Harris, 250-300. Leslie White offers a splenetic summary of Boasian critiques of primitive communism in *The Evolution of Culture: The Development of Civilization to the Fall of Rome* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007), 256. Similarly, Chris Knight notes that the Boasians were hostile "in particular to the notion of primitive communism." Chris Knight, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 62.

is explicable in terms of more than just his political commitments, though these were obviously important. Most crucially, Briggs' embrace of organicist theories of race predisposed him against the Boasian view, which held that cultural differences were purely the outcome of contingent histories. Briggs' assertions of an African race-genius for communism, and his broader arguments about the inevitability of racial conflict between groups, carried him far outside the Boasian mainstream of New Negro thought. From this vantage point, and with his increasing immersion in Marxist theory, Briggs was well-positioned to find in primitive communism a useful concept for advancing his political goals.

If Briggs' portrait of a communist Africa diverged from the main lines of New Negro anthropological thought, it was consonant in important and hitherto unappreciated ways with broader New Negro writings on Africa. John Cullen Gruesser has argued that early twentieth-century depictions of Africa in black literature were heavily indebted to the conventions of "Ethiopianism." Based on the Bible verse in Psalms 68:31 ("Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God"), Ethiopianism, in Gruesser's rendering, consisted of four key elements: an assertion of common heritage of Africans and African Americans; a cyclical view of the history of races, in which different races rise and fall out of divine favor; a glorious future for African-descended peoples; and a kind of monumentalism, defined by Wilson J. Moses as "an expression of the desire to associate black Americans with the symbols of wealth, intelligence, stability, and power," particularly those of ancient African societies. Often accompanying these tropes was an assertion of African American exceptionalism in the redemption of Africa. As Gruesser documents, these tropes dominate early

twentieth-century depictions of Africa in black literature. By the time of the Harlem Renaissance, however, black writers had begun exploring challenges to Ethiopianism. Alain Locke explicitly decried “the missionary condescension of the past generations in their attitude toward Africa. . . We must realize that in some respects we need what Africa has to give us as much as, or even more than, Africa needs what we have to give her.” Along another axis, George Schuyler's novel *Slaves Today* advanced a critique of contemporary Liberia, deromanticizing the country often singled out for praise in Ethiopianist discourse.⁶⁵

Briggs' concept of African communism can thus be seen as one strand of the anti-Ethiopianist wing of New Negro thought. Briggs' praise for the structure of traditional African communities contrasts sharply with the Ethiopianist tenor of Garvey's pledge to aid in “civilizing the backwards tribes of Africa.” Similarly, his emphasis on the communal nature of those societies places his discussions of Africa well outside the monumentalizing tradition. For Briggs, it was not the wealth of African rulers with which he wished to associate, but the societies that lacked such rulers altogether. If, in Gruesser's account, the Harlem Renaissance stands as a moment in which African American literature begins taking its first steps away from the conventions of Ethiopianism, Briggs' writings in the *Crusader* form an underappreciated part of this movement, distinguished not only by their political and theoretical uniqueness, but also by the firmness with

65 Moses, “More Stately Mansions: New Negro Movements and Langston Hughes' Literary Theory,” *Langston Hughes Review* IV no. 1 (1985): 42; Locke, “Apropos of Africa,” in *The Works of Alain Locke*, ed. Charles Molesworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 263; John Cullen Gruesser, *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing About Africa* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 4-5. For more on New Negro representations of Africa, see Kathy J. Ogren, “What is Africa to Me?: African Strategies in the Harlem Renaissance,” in *Imagining Home: Class, Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora*, ed. Sidney Lemelle and Robin D.G. Kelley (London: Verso, 1994); and Jones, “Brightest Africa.”

which they broke with the tropes governing black writing on Africa.

As a whole, *The Crusader's* writings on race in this latter period evince this same combination of novelty and familiarity. A number of themes from the journal's early period continue in these years: the skepticism about the possibility of black-white unity, a corresponding belief in the primordial power of race, and a dedication to black emancipation as the key political point of orientation. Other elements fade, such as the support for American nationalism and the tendency to castigate Negroes for the oppression they faced. Finally, new themes begin to appear. In the case of both the question of black-white alliances and emigration to Africa, the most important new element is an engagement with Marxist politics. The next section will examine Briggs' developing Marxism and the institutional vectors from which it came.

The Crusader and Socialist Thought

At the same times the *Crusader* was publishing Briggs' strikingly original reflections on racial politics, the journal was also engaging more deeply with Marxist thought. Interestingly, much of this engagement was mediated by a relationship with the Socialist Party, whose reputation as the champion of colorblind Marxism is by now well-established in the historiography. As we shall see, though Briggs later disavowed any real interest in the SP, the *Crusader* covered and promoted the party regularly, even long after the 1919 split, in which the Left Wing was expelled for, among other things, pursuing a course of affiliation with the Third International. That Briggs, and the other cadres of the

African Blood Brotherhood, would go on to become some of the most famous black members of the Third International after they joined the Communist Party in 1921 only adds to the irony that the SP would play a large role in Briggs' introduction to Marxism.⁶⁶

From its first issues, *The Crusader* showed an interest in the Socialist Party's potential as an instrument of black liberation. In the inaugural issue, Briggs printed a glowing piece on the Socialist candidates in 1918 elections, when the party ran A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen for the New York State Assembly, and Dr. George Frazier Miller for Congress. The party's willingness to support outspoken black candidates impressed Briggs, who wrote in turn advocated that "the Race [vote] the entire Socialist ticket." At the same time, Briggs was careful to hedge his support with a disclaimer, averring that "this magazine is neither pro-Socialist, pro-Republican nor, least of all, pro-Democratic. . . it is distinctly pro-Negro!" As the disclaimer indicates, however impressed Briggs may have been by the SP's black candidates, he was more interested in using the campaigns as polemical devices to remind his readers of the bankruptcy of the main parties than in throwing his lot in with the socialists just yet.⁶⁷

He continued to pay attention to the SP's actions regarding the race question through the rest of the fall. In the October issue, the *Crusader* carried an expanded profile on George Frazier Miller. Briggs praised Miller for being "a capable and courageous defender of the oppressed and persecuted and a

66 J.A. Zumoff offers what is, to my knowledge, the only acknowledgment of this in the literature on the *Crusader*, commenting that "the early *Crusader* was much more interested in the Socialist Party than in Russian Communism." Zumoff, 207-8.

67 "The Negro Candidates," *Crusader*, September 1918, 8.

relentless opponent of all forms of injustices without regard to their perpetrators.” The piece also ran a lengthy quote from Miller explaining why he was a socialist and denouncing the betrayals of the Republican Party. The following month, Briggs ran an editorial relating the SP national executive committee's passing of a resolution calling for self-determination to be extended to “all subject peoples and races of both the central and allied powers to determine the conditions of their own existence.” He also noted that the *New York Call*, the SP daily, was one of only two New York Papers to carry a statement on Liberian self-determination by the black church. Though Briggs devoted far more attention in this period to the actions of Woodrow Wilson, the SP was certainly in his field of vision.⁶⁸

The SP's presence in the pages of the *Crusader* increased as time went on. In the spring of 1919, Briggs ran a book review by James Oneal, a white SP leader who edited the *Call* and would author an important socialist tract on the race question a few years later. Oneal's review concentrated on the question of miscegenation, asserting its inevitability and mocking Southern attacks on it. Interestingly, this review ran one month after Briggs' editorial, “Amalgamation,” condemned miscegenation. Oneal's presence, as a white socialist, in the *Crusader* in this period is indicative of the friendly relations that existed between the journal and the SP.⁶⁹

There are also suggestions of ideological cross-pollination between the *Crusader* and the SP. Though, as we have seen, Briggs retained strong black nationalist leanings throughout his tenure at the *Crusader*, at times he could

68 “Men of Our Times: Dr. George Frazier Miller,” *Crusader*, October 1918, 16-17; “Socialists and Liberians Demand a Free Africa.”

69 James Oneal, “Book Review,” *Crusader*, May 1919, 26.

conceptualize class struggle in a color-blind manner reminiscent of the *Messenger's* theoretical pieces on race. In a piece on workers being deported from factory towns in Pennsylvania, Briggs argued that “no color line is drawn in this class struggle by the ruling powers.” The piece emphasized that both races were being affected, pointing to the lack of response from civic associations to “this exile of unemployed blacks and whites.” Briggs' consciousness of racial oppression, it seems, was not yet penetrating his conceptualization of class struggle. Given his friendliness towards the SP, its own colorblind theory of class struggle seems a likely influence on Briggs' formulation here.⁷⁰

The *Crusader's* relationship with the SP would continue throughout most of the journal's life, up until Briggs and much of the rest of the ABB's leadership joined the CP in the summer of 1921. Importantly, this relationship continued well after the split in the SP in the summer of 1919, when the center and right factions of the party expelled the left, who wished to align themselves explicitly with the Bolsheviks. This schism did little to dampen Briggs' enthusiasm for the party. In the fall of 1919, the *Crusader* once more called for a vote for the SP, arguing that in addition to enhancing the party's chance of delivering on its promises to blacks, such a vote would also for the Republican Party to “sit up and take notice” of black political strength. In the same issue, the journal also reprinted a notice from the *Call* about a threat Garvey had received in the mail, supposedly from “a band of men who are being asked by high public officials to

70 “Deportation,” *Crusader*, April 1919, 23. For more on the SP and race, see Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1977); Foley, 70-121; William P. Jones, “Nothing Special to Offer the Negro’: Revisiting the Debsian View of the Negro Question,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 74 no. 1 (2008): 212-24.

murder every Negro of importance in New York.” That Briggs chose the *Call* as the venue with which to broadcast his plans to ignore the threats speaks, once more, to the relationship the SP and the *Crusader* maintained at this point.⁷¹

Over the next year, the *Crusader* continued to endorse the SP. In January of 1920, in a discussion of the persecution of black farmers in Elaine, Arkansas, Briggs declared that [a]rraying ourselves with the Socialist party will be the most effective and *fearsome* answer we can give to the to the brutal challenge of the courts of Arkansas.” In March, the journal ran a short promotion for the party-aligned Rand School, where interested readers could go to get answers to the question “What is Socialism?” Briggs motivated the importance of this question with reference to the suspension of the socialist representatives from the state legislature in Albany, declaring that “[e]veryone is asking ‘Who are the Socialists What is Socialism?’” “An understanding of Socialist theories and principles,” he argued, was indispensable for modern life. That summer, he published an evaluation of the different parties in the US that argued the SP had “an ideal platform from the Negro's point of view.” Briggs was effusive in his praise for the party's position on race, pronouncing it “unequivocally for equal opportunities for both races, for the stamping out of lynching, jim-crowism, segregation, disenfranchisement and all other handicaps now suffered by the Negro.” He paid special attention to the party's position on the colonial question, commending it for standing “for the right of the Negroes of Haiti and Africa to choose their own form of government.” In October, the *Crusader* once more endorsed the SP in

⁷¹ “What Your Vote for the Socialist Party Would Do,” *Crusader*, October 1919, 12; “Negro Editor's Life Threatened,” *Crusader*, October 1919, 26.

the statewide elections. Briggs pointed to the party's nomination of black candidates for six positions that year. Though the Republicans were also nominating black candidates, Briggs asked his readers "why other party has ever matched the Socialist party in its courageous nomination of colored men to run for office in white (Socialist) districts?" He was also even more laudatory in his praise of SP policy on race, asserting the party "states in clearest terms, free from ambiguity, its promises to the Negro, [and] has time and again to the fullest extent of its power translated those promises into action." Again, he called special attention to the party's statements on the colonial question, praising it for having "gone out of its way to denounce the exploitation of Africa by European imperialistic pirates, and...declar[ing] its belief in the right of the African to self-government." Though later historians have emphasized the critiques black radicals had of the Socialist Party, until 1921 the *Crusader* had strikingly little to offer in the way of such criticism.⁷²

Briggs' enthusiastic praise for the SP is important for a few reasons. First, it calls into question later recollections of his, on the basis of which historians have tended to overlook the extent of the relationship between the *Crusader* and the SP. In an exchange with a historian, Briggs recalled that "[a]lthough some of my friends and associates had long been members of the U.S. Socialist party, I had never had the slightest interest in that party or its program." The *Crusader's*

⁷² "The Arkansas Challenge," *Crusader*, January 1920, 6; "What is Socialism?" *Crusader*, March 1920, 7; "The Political Situation," *Crusader*, August 1920, 5-6; "Randolph for State Comptroller," *Crusader*, November 1920, 8; "A Double Appeal," *Crusader*, November 1920, 8. These enthusiastic endorsements call into question Makalani's argument that the *Crusader* group had grown disillusioned with the ability of socialists and communists to deal with race question. Indeed, here Briggs bases his praise for the SP on precisely this question. Makalani's argument is based on writings by Domingo in the spring of 1920, but these editorials demonstrate that Domingo's skepticism was not representative of Briggs and the rest of the group around the *Crusader*. Makalani, 75-6.

coverage of the party strongly suggests otherwise. Since these letters have also been used to support the argument that the Comintern's anti-imperialism was the most important factor in attracting Briggs to Marxism, their unreliability on the matter of Briggs' relationship to the Socialist Party is crucial. This speaks directly to the second factor the writings on the SP are important. Briggs' enthusiasm for the SP, so often overlooked, provides a more proximate explanation for his development as a Marxist. As Minkah Makalani has noted, despite the claims for the Comintern's importance that abound in the historiography, the *Crusader*, during its three-year run, “only mention[s] the Comintern in three of its final five issues.” Given the SP's relatively greater weight in the pages of the journal, it makes more sense to look to it, and not the Comintern, as the most important source in Briggs' journey towards Marxism.⁷³

From the spring of 1919 on, Briggs showed an increasing interest in and subscription to the tenets of Marxism. “Capitalist” began showing up as an epithet in his writings, and he began developing a critique not only of racial domination, but of capitalist exploitation as well. He deployed this critique most prominently in a discussion of Andrew Carnegie's charitable work. Briggs was merciless in decrying those who would defend Carnegie on this basis. That very wealth that Carnegie donated originated in

⁷³ Briggs, letter to Oakley C. Johnson, April 10, 1961, 1. Box 1, Folder 16, Mark Solomon and Robert Research Files on African Americans and Socialism, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University. Other aspects of these recollections are also unreliable. For example, Briggs told Johnson that he had never had any interest in any back-to-Africa schemes, when in fact the *Crusader* regularly promoted emigrationism. Similarly, Briggs told Theodore Draper that he was not “interested in socialism per se,” but that his interest sprang from “the enlightened attitude of the Russian Bolsheviks toward national minorities.” As we have seen, however, Briggs' interest in socialism predated and developed independently from his interest in the Bolsheviks. Qtd in Zumoff, 210-11.

the inhuman and grinding exploitation of other men and of weak women and young children. He accumulated his hundreds of millions by denying to others an equitable share in the wealth *their* labor produced and by forcing his employes [*sic*] to work at starvation wages and long hours, using scabs to replace them when they organized to resist his financial oppression and having them shot down by state militias when they dared to resist his efforts to lock them out and starve them and their families.

Briggs attributed Carnegie's image as a philanthropist to the work of his "minion media." He backed all of this up with reference to Marx's "Value Price and Profit," a pamphlet on economics. Briggs praised Marx's "unanswerable logic" for demonstrating that the owners of capital exist by exploiting their workers. Later, he showed himself to be familiar with Marxist arguments about the historical novelty of capital, quoting "Value Price and Profit" and remarking that "[m]an can exist, without capital, but capital cannot exist without man-power, without labor." Clearly, Briggs' interest in Marxism was not limited to theories of primitive communism.⁷⁴

Briggs' intellectual development as a Marxist and socialist thus clearly predated his engagement with Communism and the USSR. The *Crusader* had a close relationship with the SP, promoting and supporting the party for long after the 1919 split that took most of those who oriented themselves on the Bolshevik example. Despite his later protestations, Briggs was deeply interested in the political possibilities of American socialism from mid-1919 until at least late 1920. During these same years, he continued to develop his own highly unorthodox ideas about race and liberation, combining elements of socialist thought with black nationalism in truly novel ways. With this picture of Briggs' ideological

⁷⁴ "Andrew Carnegie – Fiend or Angle? [*sic*]," *Crusader*, October 1919, 13; "What is Capital?" *Crusader*, December 1919, 11. Note that both of these articles appeared before Briggs devoted any sustained attention to the Bolsheviks in the *Crusader*.

formation established, we can now evaluate the impact the Russian Revolution had on his thought.

Bolshevism at the *Crusader*

Paradoxically, although the *Crusader* is the New Negro venue where historians have most appreciated the impact of the Russian Revolution, the journal actually devoted less time to discussing it than many of its peers. On one level, Briggs' relative disinterest in the Bolsheviks poses a substantial historical puzzle. In the Spring of 1919, when he was leaving his Wilsonian phase behind, Bolshevism would have seemed to be a logical alternative, retaining Wilsonianism's internationalism while adding to it a commitment to colonial emancipation. Why Briggs showed such little interest at this point, when people he worked closely with in the New Negro milieu showed a great deal, is difficult to say, based on existing sources. A complementary question, however, is more yielding: why, given this relative disinterest, did Briggs and most of the rest of the ABB leadership join the American CP when they did? The remainder of this chapter will attempt to answer this question by examining the *Crusader's* coverage of the Russian Revolution in light of the picture of the journal's intellectual trajectory just established. It will argue that, as historians have claimed, the Comintern did indeed play a crucial role in bringing the *Crusader* to communism, but that this role was less a matter of bringing a nationalist to Marxism, as has been traditionally argued, than of providing a Marxist and a nationalist with a theoretically cogent way of reconciling his commitments.

Before addressing these writings directly, however, it is necessary to review one important interpretation of Briggs' move towards communism. Minkah Makalani, in his recent book on black radical internationalism, has argued that Briggs was drawn to the Comintern largely as a result of “theoretical opening[s]” created by Asian radicals, whose arguments had pushed Soviet Marxism away from the alleged Eurocentrism by which it had previously been marked. When groups like the ABB turned to the Comintern, Makalani claims, “they were essentially responding to the work of Asian radicals in the Second Congress.” Through a discussion in particular of MN Roy's role in the formulation of Comintern policy on what was called “the colonial question,” Makalani asserts that the work of Asian radicals in opening up the Comintern was essential to its ability to attract black radicals like Briggs.⁷⁵

Important as Makalani's work is in calling attention to intercolonial connections in the Comintern, his argument for the influence of Asian radicals like MN Roy on Briggs and the rest of the ABB is not sustainable. As Makalani notes, what attracted Briggs and his comrades to the Comintern was the resolute opposition to imperialism found in its statements. Yet the discussion of the contributions of Roy and others focuses on subsidiary questions about the necessity of capitalist development in the colonial world, and whether workers in the colonies or the advanced capitalist countries would be the decisive revolutionary agency. The specific contributions Roy made, in other words, were not what attracted Briggs to the Comintern. Moreover, the steadfast opposition

⁷⁵ Makalani, 71-86; Makalani, “Internationalizing the Third International: The African Blood Brotherhood, Asian Radicals, and Race, 1919-1922,” *Journal of African American History* 96 no. 2 (Spring 2011): 151-178.

to colonialism that Makalani correctly identifies as key predated Roy's interventions. At the first Congress of the Comintern, in 1919, Gregory Zinoviev, would later head the agency, condemned the social democratic parties for offering "not even a hint that colonial slavery must cease. . . but rather a whitewash of bourgeois colonial policies." Earlier writings by Lenin and other Bolsheviks on the subject contain similar arguments. That same year, at the Second All-Russia Congress of Communist Organizations of The Peoples of the East, Lenin himself argued that

the socialist revolution will not be solely, or chiefly, a struggle of the revolutionary proletarians in each country against the bourgeoisie-no, it will be a struggle of all the imperialist-oppressed colonies and countries, of all dependent countries, against international imperialism. Characterising the approach of the world social revolution in the Party Programme we adopted last March, we said that the civil war of the working people against the imperialists and exploiters in all the advanced countries is beginning to be combined with national wars against international imperialism.

In other words, the sentiments in the Comintern declarations that most attracted Briggs pre-existed Roy's intervention, and the ideas Makalani identifies Roy as the genesis for could be found in the allegedly Eurocentric Marxism of the Bolsheviks. With this in mind, the argument that Roy was responsible for the aspects of Comintern policy that attracted Briggs is significantly weakened.⁷⁶

What drew Briggs to Bolshevism was not the revision in the doctrine made by Asian radicals. Rather, it was the conscious linking of anticolonial nationalism and revolutionary Marxism articulated most clearly at the Second Congress of the Comintern. Briggs had developed both of these currents of thought prior to

⁷⁶ John Riddell, *Founding the Communist International: Proceedings and documents of the First Congress: March 1919* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1987), 194; V.I. Lenin, "Address to the Second All-Russia congress of Communist Organisations of The Peoples of the East," in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 151-62.

showing any substantial interest in Bolshevism. The remainder of this chapter will analyze the *Crusader's* coverage of the revolution and analyze how the anticolonial synthesis coming from the Comintern affected Briggs' thought.

Though he wrote about the revolution less than other New Negro radicals, Briggs' thoughts on the subject contain familiar themes from the broader New Negro engagement. Like Johnson and the writers at the *Messenger*, he discerned an analogy between the situation of the Bolsheviks, or oppressed peoples living in Russia, and that of blacks in the United States, and he used this analogy to think through the strategic situation he confronted. Also like his peers, Briggs placed the New Negro in the context of Bolshevism, as twin representatives of the current moment. Finally, Briggs envisioned an alliance between black Americans and the Bolsheviks, an alliance that would provide the race with a strong enough ally to finally overcome white domination. Together, these three themes encompassed the bulk of Briggs' writings on the revolution.

Like the analogy developed at the *Messenger*, Briggs' analogy between blacks and the revolution suggested a few different relationships. At times, he equated black radicals to the Bolsheviks, asserting common roles for the two groups in their respective countries. In other places, Briggs equated the situation of blacks in America to the Jews of Russia, arguing that what Bolshevism did for the Jews an American revolution could do for blacks. What unites these different articulations of the black-Russian analogy is a common attempt to understand the problems of black Americans through the lens provided by the Russian revolution.

Briggs first broached the subject of Bolshevism and race in December of

1921 in an article entitled “Bolshevism and Race Prejudice.” The editorial was responding to black editors and cartoonists who were “showing an inclination to couple Bolshevism with race prejudice.”⁷⁷ Briggs took a hard line against such inclinations, condemning black journalists for believing the “lie factories” of “the same white capitalist press” that constantly lied about black Americans. In Russia, Briggs proclaimed, “pogroms are no more because, for one thing, there are no reactionary capitalist influences at work to pit worker against worker and race against race.” Instead, “all men are equal, of whatever race.” In America, by contrast, “race riots and pogroms are the rule rather than the exception.” By directly comparing the situation of Jews in Russia and blacks in the United States, Briggs created an analogy between the groups, suggesting that an American Bolshevism could eliminate race riots in America just as it had in Russia.⁷⁸

The following editorial in the same issue also took up the subject of Russia, though from a different angle that reveals much about Briggs' thinking on the revolutions' relationship to the race at the time. The editorial attacked black ignorance in a manner reminiscent of the *Crusader's* earlier episodes of nationalist self-castigation. Briggs lamented the way “Negroes have swallowed in the past and are still swallowing the anti-Negro propaganda of the scoundrelly caucasian capitalist-imperialist gang.” Briggs explicitly differentiated himself from the nationalist line of argument, however, by noting that readers “have only to study the interracial field to find the same phenomenon in operation everywhere.” On example of this was the way unorganized workers looked at

⁷⁷ For one example of this inclination, see the article from the *Crisis* comparing Russian revolutionaries to a white lynch mob. “Safe for Democracy,” *The Crisis*, April 1918, 270.

⁷⁸ “Bolshevism and Race Prejudice,” *Crusader*, December 1919, 9-10. Briggs returned to the analogy between blacks and Jews in “The Republican Betrayal,” *Crusader*, June 1921, 8.

labor unions. Briggs thought it self-evident that unorganized workers benefited from union victories, and attributed the labor movement's failures to “the amazing ignorance and gullibility of the masses of all races.” His second example was Soviet Russia. Briggs argued that again, workers of all races were all too quick to believe the “lie factories” when it came to the revolution. This occurred despite the revolution being “in the interests of the workers themselves because an experiment in genuine majority rule and national ownership of the resources of the land” could only help workers. While Briggs takes care in this piece to rebut the allegations of a Soviet nationalization of women, and other familiar propaganda pieces, it is notable that his defense of the revolution mentions nothing about Soviet anticolonialism, despite the Bolsheviks' publication of the secret colonial treaties between imperial powers, anticolonial policies in Central Asia, and condemnation of the League of Nations for complicity in imperialism. Briggs was impressed by Soviet socialism; at this point (late 1919), it does not appear that the revolution's international aspect was a subject with which he was particularly familiar.⁷⁹

Briggs returned to the analogy between Jews and black Americans a year later, this time in the context of the Tulsa race riot. Describing the way state authorities continued to persecute the victims of the black victims of the riot, Briggs declared this sort of “justice” reminiscent of “the kind of justice the Jew used to get in capitalist-Czarist Russia, until the workers of all races arose in their wrath and overthrew the capitalist-Czarist combination.” In case the point of the analogy was still unclear, Briggs made it plain: “Now the workers of all races get

⁷⁹ “Henry Dubbs in Every Race,” *Crusader*, December 1919, 10-11.

justice – in Russia. How long will the Negro in America continue to fall for capitalist bunk?” What the revolution had accomplished for the Jews, it could also accomplish for black Americans.⁸⁰

The *Crusader* also argued for a narrower analogy, this time between black radicals and the Bolsheviks themselves. In a discussion of the Ku Klux Klan's plans for a massive media campaign, Briggs took a paragraph to reflect on the value of propaganda. Propaganda, he argued, was responsible for the outcome of the Great War, as it had “destroyed the German morale.” Since then, “Soviet Russia has destroyed enemy after enemy by the insidious power of propaganda,” most importantly by convincing the workers of other countries not to fight against it. Briggs placed the African Blood Brotherhood in the same situation, recalling that it had been formed “two years ago...to meet just such a menace as that represented by the resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan.” The ABB put a strong emphasis on propaganda, and formed two committees on the subject, “[o]ne to spread Negro propaganda, and the other to refute anti-Negro propaganda.” In this passage, Briggs moves the subject of the analogy from the victims of capitalist oppression – the Jews in the case of Russia, blacks in America – to the agency responsible for overcoming that oppression. The Bolsheviks provided an example of why propaganda worked, and the ABB intended to follow in their footsteps.⁸¹

This kind of explicit engagement with the fruits of the Bolshevik victory, and its implications for blacks, was comparatively rare in the *Crusader*. More

80 “The Tulsa Outrage,” *Crusader*, July 1921, 8.

81 “Propaganda and the Ku Klux Klan,” *Crusader*, February 1921, 8.

common were simple gestures towards the revolution as one part of the context in which the New Negro operated. In the *Crusader's* first year, references to Bolshevism most often used the revolution metonymically, to stand in for the wider spirit of unrest sweeping the globe in the aftermath of the Great War. The reference in the May 1919 issue is representative. There, Briggs observed that the “landlords and real estate agents of Harlem are doing their merry best to increase the converts of Bolshevism.” Other references around this time are similar. In September, Briggs commented on Congress' inability to stop price-gouging after the war, ending with “[a]nd still they wonder at Bolshevism! At direct action by the people for the betterment of conditions that are fast becoming intolerable.” Bolshevism's ability to stand in for “direct action by the people” was approached from the other direction the following month, when Briggs addressed the term's use as an epithet “reactionaries delight to fling around loosely against those insist. . . on agitating for their rights.” Briggs was unequivocal in his response, declaring that [i]f to fight for one's rights is to be Bolsheviks, then we are Bolsheviks and let them make the most of it!” Briggs also noted wryly that he did not “know exactly what the reactionaries desire to convey by the term – we do not think they know themselves.” Yet it also appears that, during this period, Briggs himself was not overly concerned with what Bolshevism meant either. As a signifier of militant struggle against “the cut-throat, child-exploiting, capitalist-imperialist crew,” he was happy to embrace the term. But there is little evidence of an appreciation for the revolution's importance comparable to that developed by Johnson or the *Messenger*.⁸²

82 “High Rents and Bolshevism,” *Crusader*, May 1919, 4; “And They Wonder at Bolshevism!”

Perhaps the most common way that Bolshevism was discussed in the *Crusader* was as an ally for blacks in the struggle for freedom. As his early enthusiasm for Wilson suggests, Briggs was actively searching for agencies capable of aiding his fight. When Wilson revealed his loyalties by neglecting the colonial question at Versailles, Briggs began looking elsewhere. As we have seen, emigrationism formed one aspect of his alternative, as Briggs proposed that a strong African state, formed in part by black Americans' emigration, would work to advance the struggle for black freedom the globe over. The Bolshevik government in Russia was another alternative, one which Briggs was to ultimately find credible enough that he would fuse with it organizationally.

Briggs first discussed the prospect of Soviet Russia acting as an ally to blacks in mid-1919. In an editorial entitled "Make Their Cause Your Own," he exhorted his readers to support the forces of radicalism, in particular the SP and the Bolsheviks. He praised Russia by noting that it is "the only government outside of our own Africa and democratic South America in which a Negro occupies a high and responsible position." Briggs noted that black Americans were disproportionately workers, and thus stood to gain more from the victory of the radicals than other groups. He closed on an optimistic note: "We need not fight alone if we breast the sea upon the irresistible tide of liberalism that is at present sweeping the world." Once more, here the Soviet Union appears primarily as an exemplar of the kinds of forces who could act as powerful allies in the struggle, but without any sort of special contributions of its own.⁸³

Crusader, September 1919, 8; "Bolshevist!" *Crusader*, October 1919, 9.
 83 "Make Their Cause Your Own," *Crusader*, July 1919, 6.

During the first few months of 1920, Briggs began to show more appreciation for the Bolsheviks' specific contributions as an anti-imperialist power. In his short story "The Ray of Fear," a sort of science fiction tale of anti-colonial war, he lists "Soviet Russia" among the nations with which his protagonist is allied. In the same issue, Briggs offers a lengthy assessment of Bolshevism that stands as the *Crusader's* most thorough engagement with the revolution before its editors joined the CP in the summer of 1921. Entitled "Bolshevism's Menace: To Whom and to What?" the essay argues that Bolshevism stands as a threat to those who threaten blacks. Briggs begins with the claims made against the revolution. England and France, he notes call it a threat to democracy. Briggs is merciless with this claim, listing the crimes that constitute the West's supposed democracy, and concluding "Is this the 'democracy' to which the spread of Bolshevism is a menace? Then may God advance the spread of Bolshevism through Europe, Asia, and Africa, and in every country where oppression stalks!" He proceeds to give a brief summary of the Soviet system, praising it for "forcing the parasites to work," before moving into the heart of the essay, which is a consideration of Bolshevik foreign policy. Briggs argues that is "totally different from and wholly opposed to imperialism." As evidence, he offers the Bolsheviks' renunciation of Czarist claims to Persia and the other subordinate nations in the Russian empire. Using the language of the revolutionaries, Briggs notes that "[t]he right to self-determination of even certain weak and so-called 'backward' peoples in Asiatic Russia has been recognized by the Bolsheviks." Briggs closes the essay by considering the likely effects of the revolution on the struggle against colonialism. Comparing it to

Wilson's talk of self-government, he wryly predicts it will set “a bad example to the enslaved populations under British and French rule.” Clearly, Briggs was impressed by what he had seen of the Bolsheviks' revolutionary internationalism. Moreover, his use of the language of self-determination in reference to Soviet national policy suggests a familiarity with some of the revolutionary propaganda being distributed.⁸⁴

Interestingly, this article would be the last one published on the revolution for almost half a year. Unfortunately, the archive contains little on what lay behind this. One possible explanation is a disillusionment with Bolshevism. In between this article and the next *Crusader* piece discussing the revolution, Briggs published “At the Crossroads,” in which he asserted that socialism could be “perverted” by imperialism and racism, and that “there are even now signs of perversion of the Socialist doctrines, both at home and abroad.” However, the likelihood that Briggs was referring to the Russian revolution with this statement is exceedingly small. The next month, after “At the Crossroads” was published, Briggs returned to the subject of Soviet anti-imperialism, praising the Bolsheviks once more for their stand against colonial domination. Along with imperial rivalries, Bolshevism was “accelerating and reinforcing the mighty 'rising tide of color'. . . engulfing and destroying European imperialism.” Briggs was unequivocal in his praise, declaring “Long live the Russian Soviet, with its noble ideals of on self-determination and the rights of weaker peoples.” Given this, it seems highly unlikely that Briggs was criticizing the Bolsheviks for perverting

⁸⁴ C. Valentine, “The Ray of Fear,” *Crusader*, February 1920, 19; “Bolshevism's Menace: To Whom and to What?” *Crusader*, February 1920, 5-6.

socialism with racism just the month before. Unfortunately, no alternative hypothesis suggests itself to explain this discrepancy.⁸⁵

Briggs continued to view the Bolsheviks as an important ally in the cause of black freedom right up through the summer of 1921, when he would join the CP. In the fall of 1920, he returned to the theme of Bolshevik alliances with colonized countries, forecasting a pincer movement between the Bolshevik advance on Eastern Europe and an Arab nationalist "*Jehad*." Briggs counted Soviet Russia's backing of the colonized countries as a significant factor in their favor when weighing the odds of such a conflict. A few months later, he offered a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that Russia and Haiti invade the US to bring order to a "lawless America" wracked by lynchers and bandits. Though the *Crusader* printed no more extended discussions of Bolshevism before the summer of 1921, it is clear that Briggs retained a favorable view of the revolution throughout this period.⁸⁶

After Briggs and other senior members of the ABB joined the CP, coverage of revolutionary Russia in the *Crusader* shifted only slightly. In August, it reprinted proceedings from the Comintern dealing with relations with the Italian Socialist Party. In December, Briggs ran excerpts from Bolshevik treaties with formerly colonized countries, as an advertisement of Bolshevik action on the promises of internationalism. Overall, what changed most in the *Crusader's* coverage was not its discussions of the revolution, but rather its stance on domestic politics. The Workers Party (the legal apparatus of the still-

85 "At the Crossroads"; "The Soviet Successes," *Crusader*, July 1920, 10-11.

86 "Trend of World Events in Their Relation to the Negro," *Crusader*, September 1920, 9-10; "Why Not Intervention?" *Crusader*, April 1921, 9-10.

underground CP), previously absent from the journal, suddenly began making regular appearances, always accompanied by vigorous praise. Similarly, the SP, which had received so much praise of its own over the previous years, came in for biting criticism for refusing to affiliate with the Third International.⁸⁷

As such, it makes sense to position Briggs' decision to join the CP as a decision to formally join a political current with which he had considered himself in alliance for some time. Though the historiographical emphasis on the impact the Comintern and the Soviet Union had on this decision is correct, scholars have often overestimated the degree of ideological movement involved in Briggs' joining. Rather than seeing the Comintern as moving Briggs "from nationalism to communism," the process is better conceptualized in terms of an articulation of ideological elements Briggs already believed. As discussed above, he had committed to socialism and the end of capitalism long before paying any significant attention to events in Russia. And of course, his commitment to anti-imperialism is well-known. Joining the CP, the American representative of the Comintern, offered Briggs a way to fuse these two concerns in an ideologically coherent manner, particular after the "Theses on the National Question" were passed at the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920. At this point, the Comintern was firmly on the record as linking the struggle against capitalism and the struggle against imperialism in one global movement. Indeed, Lenin's emphasis on the duty of workers in imperialist countries to resist their own bourgeoisie, and to win the trust of those their country colonized, fit closely with

87 "Congress of the Communist International," *Crusader*, August 1921, 12; "Russia and Self-Determination," *Crusader*, December 1921, 11; "Communists Champion Negro," *Crusader*, August 1921, 12; "The Socialist Surrender," *Crusader*, August 1921, 8.

Briggs' emphasis on the culpability of the European proletariat in supporting imperialism. As Bolshevik policy moved closer to Briggs' own politics, joining the movement he was praising as an invaluable ally for black self-determination became less and less a departure of any sort, and more the logical path to follow.

Conclusion

Briggs and the other ABB leaders who joined the CP would go on to become crucial figures in the development of American Communism. For years, they acted as the organization's central black cadre, building the base for the rapid expansion, particularly in Harlem, that would come with the Great Depression. Though Briggs would never occupy center stage in this story, he played a critical role behind the scenes, editing the CP journal *The Liberator* and arguing CP policy on the race question. This chapter has attempted to to reconstruct the process by which Briggs would be set on this path, a process that has been far less straightforward than historians have realized.

As one of the most staunchly nationalist figures in the New Negro pantheon, Briggs has generally been assumed to have been led to the CP by Comintern national policy. As we have seen, however, Briggs became a committed anti-capitalist quite early, before the Comintern even published its main theses on the national question. Forging a close relationship with the SP, Briggs saw the destruction of capitalism as a logical complement to liberation from racial oppression.

Briggs' relationship with the SP speaks to the ideological fluidity of the years following the end of the war. Too often, scholars have narrowed the sources of the dialogue in which Briggs was engaged, seeing nationalist thought, or communist variants thereof, as his only interlocutors. In fact, Briggs engaged in intellectual exchange with a wide range of currents. In his early Wilsonian phase, he took significant aspects of liberal internationalism over and attempted to put them to use for colonial liberation. When that project failed, he began looking elsewhere, finding encouragement from both the SP and emigrationist traditions. In short, a close examination of the *Crusader* reveals Briggs to have been a vigorous and expansive intellect, eagerly engaging in dialogue with whatever forces he felt could be of aid to the struggle for freedom.

In this, as in many other ways, Briggs was representative of the broader New Negro intellectual culture. Though the Russian revolution may have done little to shift Briggs' political outlook, in the way it had Johnson's, his attention to it and support of it testify once more to the cosmopolitanism that reigned in those years. The years in which "the negro was in vogue" were not only years in which the eyes of the world turned towards Harlem; they were also years in which Harlem looked elsewhere, to places like Russia, for a vision of human liberation whose grandness we have yet to surpass.

Epilogue

Fifteen years after the high tide of New Negro radicalism had ebbed, A. Philip Randolph once again took the stage to discuss “the Russian question.” Both Randolph and his context had changed in the intervening years. This time, rather than arguing the revolution on street-corners before passersby in Harlem, Randolph was in Washington, DC, speaking before the National Negro Congress (NNC), a nationwide coalition of black radicals with thousands of members for which Randolph served as the President. Bolstered by his successes with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Randolph had come far from the days when he could be dismissed as another of Harlem's quixotic radicals by people like Alain Locke. The distance he had traveled in prominence and influence, however, was easily matched by the political distance Randolph had covered in the days since he and Owen had put together “America's only radical Negro monthly” on a nearly non-existent budget.

This distance was evident in Randolph's speech at the NNC in April of 1940. Entitled “The World Crisis and the Negro People Today,” it contained a blistering indictment of the congress for its alleged obeisance towards Moscow. Randolph blasted the NNC for being closely allied with the Communist Party, a party that, because it “stems from Communist Russia, its policies and program tactics and strategy are as fitful, changeful and unpredictable as the foreign policy line of Moscow.” Later, explaining his choice to condemn the congress (which resulted in a destructive split in the NNC), Randolph declared that he could not

countenance “expressing sympathy for the Soviet Union, which is the death prison where democracy and liberty have walked their 'last mile.’” Clearly, things had changed since Randolph and Owen had labeled the Soviet state the latest step in the march of democracy.¹

As might be expected, Randolph had little to say about the enthusiasm he, Owen, and much of the rest of the New Negro thinkers had shared for the Russian revolution. Historians have far too often taken Randolph's word on his pro-Russian days after World War I, treating them as a temporary enthusiasm rather quickly abandoned as 'normalcy' returned and the twenties got under way. Narratives based on this interpretation impute a rather bloodless pragmatism to their subjects, who are said to have abandoned Russia as the heady initial days of the revolution receded. The intensity of commitment Russia inspired in New Negro thought, and the transformations it wrought in black intellectual life, are easily obscured in these accounts.

As this study has demonstrated, however, the New Negro engagement with Russia was no mere dalliance, and had long-last effects on the ideological configurations of important segments of black political leadership. Randolph's anticommunism, after all, first developed in the context of his loyalty to Morris Hillquit's wing of the Socialist Party. The same ideological orientation that had led him to unreservedly celebrate the revolution in 1918 had also led him, as the communist movement developed in opposition to evolutionary socialists like

1 Randolph qtd. in Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 310-11; Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Eric Arnesen, “No ‘Graver Danger’: Black Anticommunism, the Communist Party, and the Race Question,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 3 no. 4 (Winter 2006): 13-52.

Hillquit and events in Russia proved that events would not inexorably trend towards a socialist future, to become more and more embittered against American communists and the state they supported. Similarly, Cyril Briggs' discovery in Comintern doctrine of a way to reconcile his commitments to socialism and anticolonial revolution brought into the American CP its most important early group of black cadres in the form of the African Blood Brotherhood. Many of those sitting in the crowd being denounced by Randolph at the NNC meeting had no doubt been recruited or inspired by towering figures like Harlem organizer Richard Moore, who had come with Briggs into the party in 1921. Though James Weldon Johnson would never have as intense of a commitment to either a pro or anti-communist position as Randolph and Owen, his engagement with Russia was no less transformational, as he moved from a rather conservative Washingtonian to a short-lived but intense radicalism.

The impact the revolution had on these three figures testifies to its importance in postwar black intellectual life. Russia was, quite simply, a central point of reference in the vigorous debates over the future of the race that rang out at the time. Participants in these debates attempted to give their positions support by aligning them with the new world being born in Russia, and looked to the Bolsheviks for specific remedies to the oppressions of race in the US. On subjects from race riots to internationalism, New Negro intellectuals saw in the Russian example an approach that, if applied in the United States, could bring about a revolution not only in the system of property ownership, but in racial hierarchies as well.

The importance of New Negro engagements with Russia underlines the

need for some revisions in how black politics in the postwar moment is approached. First, the fervency with which New Negro intellectuals declared their support for Bolshevism demands a more capacious understanding of black internationalism. If, as Robin Kelley and Tiffany Patterson have pointed out, black internationalisms are not “necessarily engaged with Pan-Africanism or other black-isms,” it remains a fact that scholarly examinations of black internationalism have overwhelmingly focused on modes of articulation that have developed in dialogue with Pan-Africanism or black nationalism. The New Negro engagement with Russia provides one model of the kinds of black internationalism which have developed primarily through other channels. For figures like Johnson, Randolph, and Briggs, the rising of the submerged classes was not a race-based movement, but rather a moment in the global struggle of the oppressed. At the same time, their interest in this moment was anything but colorblind. The key lesson of the revolution and the upheavals it inspired was that the time was now for black Americans to assert their strength. In concert with radical movements around the world, they could melt down the traditions of white supremacy in the United States. Ultimately, they were arguing for black Americans to take their places in a global movement not defined by race in order to complete the emancipation of their race. The kind of “traveling history” developed in New Negro print culture recapitulated this political orientation, as they read the history of the Russian revolution in terms derived from black history, and re-interpreted black history under the influence of the revolution. Both the political perspective they adopted and the historical dialectic they read through give a picture of the complicated modes of black internationalism that

developed without a vision of global blackness at their core.²

Similarly, the necessity of contextualizing the political commitments of figures like Randolph and Owen in their broader moment highlights the importance of explicit political ideology in explaining the contours of black politics. Though it may seem commonplace, recent trends in the study of black history have tended to marginalize the explanatory importance of such ideologies in favor of cultural practices of opposition and subversive engagements with popular culture.³ While these lines of inquiry have proven tremendously fruitful, the trajectory of the *Messenger* suggests that what Adolph Reed and Kenneth Warren have called “the evolving discourses of politically articulate black Americans” remain a crucial subject of inquiry for black history.⁴

The importance of such explicit political commitments also speaks to the Russian revolution's place in the intellectual space of the New Negro. Indeed, as the history recounted in this study suggests, the revolution was a central orienting point for debates over the future of the race. The New Negro attempt to mobilize Russia as an example of the kinds of politics that would allow the race to overcome the “old Negro” mentality illustrates that the history of the New Negro is not simply a history of cultural practices and interracial institutions, but one of explicit political contestation as well, in which varying

2 Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D.G. Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World,” *African Studies Review* 43 no. 1 (April 2000): 11-45.

3 For paradigmatic examples, see Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80 no. 1 (1993): 75-112; and Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007).

4 Adolph Reed Jr and Kenneth W. Warren, “Introduction” in *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought*, ed. Adolph Reed Jr and Kenneth W. Warren. (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2010), vii.

forces vied for hegemony, often while simultaneously appealing to the example of the Bolsheviks to endorse their particular commitments. Given that the revolution was a moment in which masses of people self-consciously attempted to shape the world according to their political ideologies, it is only fitting that it serve to remind us of the importance of such attempts in our own history as well.

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