The Libertarian Sage: The Conservatism of George S. Schuyler

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This thesis titled

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ABSTRACT

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Between 1925 and 1965, George Schuyler was one of the most renowned African American critics of American race relations. He earned this reputation through his weekly column for the Pittsburgh Courier and his contributions to The American Mercury. Although he began his long career as a member of the Socialist Party, he is best known for his later right-wing conservatism and controversial views on the Civil Rights Movement. The existing historical scholarship has interpreted this paradoxical change in Schuyler’s perspective as a dramatic realignment from the political Left to the political Right. This thesis contests this view, arguing that Schuyler embraced libertarian ideas about race, economic freedom and the rights of the individual early on and remained consistent in these views throughout his fifty-five year career as a writer and social critic.

Approved: ____________________________

Kevin Mattson

Professor of History
Dedicated to the unfiltered memory of (A.) S.G.L., with love
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Capitalism will probably last forever because it is the first social system that has taught its slaves to believe they are free.¹
– George S. Schuyler in The Messenger, January 1926

If the albatross of welfare is to be removed from the national neck, we shall have to scrap the socialist programs interfering with the laws of free enterprise and let laboring power be sold in the economic market for what it will bring.²
– George S. Schuyler in American Opinion, 1968

Although few may recognize his name today, between 1925 and 1965 George Schuyler was considered one of the most renowned African American intellectuals. He was a self-made man who worked his way from a transient laborer to one of the country’s most popular African American writers. For over forty years, Schuyler worked as an editor, columnist, investigative journalist and serial writer for the Pittsburgh Courier, one of the nation’s largest and most influential black newspapers. “Views and Reviews,” his popular weekly column, made him famous as an outspoken and controversial critic of American race relations.

Schuyler’s reputation as an outspoken critic of American race relations crossed the color line. Throughout his career, he also contributed essays and articles to popular periodicals read by predominantly white audiences.

¹ George Schuyler, “Shafts and Darts,” The Messenger, January 1926.
Schuyler's importance as an African American intellectual can be attributed, at least in part, to his access to these mainstream periodicals at a time when few white publishers would print black authors.

Out of the array of mainstream publications Schuyler wrote for, there is little doubt that *The American Mercury* was most important. The magazine provided him with his literary mentor H.L. Mencken, its iconoclastic editor. Under Mencken's guidance, Schuyler developed into a gifted satirist and formidable critic of American democracy. The consistent appearance of Schuyler's work in *The American Mercury* for over thirty years (even after Mencken's departure as editor) proved equally as important to his career. Through the *Mercury*, Schuyler contributed his unique black perspective to the changing cultural debates taking place among white intellectuals between the 1920s and the 1960s. Over those forty years, Schuyler witnessed the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Depression, World War II, the onset of the Cold War, the modern Civil Rights movement and countless other events that transformed his ideas and shaped his life.

As the two opening quotations indicate, George Schuyler seemed to contradict himself over the course of his career. When Schuyler arrived in Harlem during the early 1920s, he was a member of the Socialist Party. The first quote is taken from a Socialist magazine and seems to reflect a Socialist viewpoint. Schuyler is clearly critiquing capitalism, in particular, the exploitation of labor by capital interests. By contrast, the second quote seems to speak
against that very idea. His words, taken forty-two years later from the pages of American Opinion, the archconservative magazine published by the John Birch Society, reveal him as a free-market capitalist and suggest an underlying current of anti-statist sentiment. This baffling paradox has defined historical treatments of Schuyler’s life.

The narrative briefly runs something like this: George Schuyler arrived in Harlem a card-carrying member of the Socialist Party. He met fellow Socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, who introduced him to Harlem’s intellectual circles and hired him to write for their Socialist magazine The Messenger. During this time, Schuyler believed that the ultimate solution to the American race problem was a gradual socialist revolution of the interracial working classes to supplant the capitalist system, which was the underlying cause of racism to begin with. Schuyler’s star began to rise in 1924 when the Pittsburgh Courier hired him as a columnist and contributing editor. In 1926, he contributed an article to The Nation entitled “The Negro-Art Hokum.” Schuyler opposed the essentialism of the Harlem Renaissance, arguing against the existence of a distinct African American culture. The controversial article created a stir among Harlem intellectuals, solidifying Schuyler’s status as a public intellectual. Throughout the 1920s, Schuyler used his column to satirize the state of American race relations, debunk cultural and racial nationalism, attack racial separatism, and challenge the authority of black leaders, churches and advancement organizations, all while encouraging collectivist solutions to the class and race problem.
The 1930s represented the busiest and most formative decade in Schuyler’s “race towards the Right.” In the onset of the Great Depression, Schuyler became something of a social activist. He joined the NAACP as business manager for The Crisis and founded the Young Negroes Co-operative League to support the development of consumer co-operatives in local communities. He traveled to Liberia to investigate indigenous slavery, toured the American South on a fact-finding mission for the NAACP, and engaged in several national speaking tours. In addition to writing his weekly columns, he also produced two novels and numerous articles in popular publications, such as Review of Reviews, Modern Monthly, The Crisis, and The National News. During this time, Schuyler also befriended his mentor H.L. Mencken and regularly contributed to the American Mercury. However, the benchmark of Schuyler’s move towards the far right is his reaction to the Communist Party’s dubious involvement in the legal defense of the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama. Schuyler developed into an arch foe of Communism, and fought the Communist threat at home and abroad became a prominent theme in his writing after 1935. This has led biographers Oscar Williams, Jeffrey Ferguson and Jeffrey Leak to interpret Schuyler’s anti-communism as the cornerstone of his later conservatism.³

In the 1940s, Schuyler grew disillusioned with FDR and New Deal liberalism. He resented FDR’s failure to challenge Southern racism and objected to the expansion of the bureaucratic welfare state. However, his overwhelming concern was still race relations. Much of his work in this area focused on exposing racism and racial inequality within government programs, particularly employment and housing practices. Although he had misgivings about totalitarianism in Europe, Schuyler nevertheless disagreed with U.S. entry into World War II. On the whole, he resisted the idea that a “war for democracy” would end with actual democracy. Furthermore, the idea of African Americans fighting for freedom abroad in a segregated military that treated blacks as second-class citizens, struck him as hypocritical and ridiculous. Schuyler urged African Americans to oppose the war and also supported the Pittsburgh Courier’s successful “Double V” campaign that called for true democracy in the United States under the slogan “victory at home and victory abroad.”

Several of Schuyler’s biographers have argued that the onset of the Cold War period marks a new phase in Schuyler’s conservative transformation. During the post-World War II period, Schuyler was no longer becoming conservative. He was growing more entrenched in conservatism through his involvement in the growing anti-communist movement. For example, he publicly supported Senator Joseph McCarthy’s (R, WI) anti-communist crusade in his weekly column and began contributing to conservative publications including the now clearly conservative American Mercury as well as The Freeman and
In 1950 Schuyler joined the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (ACCF), an international coalition of intellectuals and artists engaged in the fight against communism, and served as a delegate to the inaugural meeting in Berlin that year. Dismayed by the organization’s soft anti-communism and refusal to support McCarthy, Schuyler resigned his membership in 1954.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, Schuyler turned his criticism towards the civil rights protests rising in the South. In his *Courier* column he characterized civil disobedience and other acts of social protest as ineffective and dangerous. These actions invited violent reprisals from angry whites. He also denounced civil rights activists and popular leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X as communist agitators. Schuyler defended his unpopular position in “Views and Reviews” until 1966, when the *Courier* dismissed him for arguing that Martin Luther King, Jr. had done nothing to deserve the Nobel Peace Prize. Schuyler’s move to the far right culminated in 1964. That year, he joined the John Birch Society, campaigned for Barry Goldwater and ran unsuccessfully for a Congressional seat on the Conservative Party ticket. For the remainder of his career, Schuyler lent his black conservative voice to such issues as urban riots, welfare, public housing, and public education, published exclusively in right-wing publications, such as *American Opinion* and *Review of the News*.

The brief narrative sketch outlined above simplifies the overarching biographical framework and highlights the key events that previous scholars have relied on to identify and explain Schuyler’s intellectual trajectory. Historians have
understood Schuyler’s contribution to American history in light of his later far-right wing conservatism. Oscar Williams’s biographical portrait explores Schuyler’s “evolution from a liberal socialist to John Birch conservative” between the 1920s and the 1960s, paying special attention to the 1930s as the period in which the most significant changes took place. He interprets Schuyler’s ideas concerning race in relation to other prominent African American thinkers. In doing so, Williams illuminates the diversity and complexity of African American intellectual thought. Where Williams succeeds in his analysis of Schuyler as the lone dissenting voice among liberal black intellectuals and leaders, he lacks a nuanced interpretation of Schuyler’s place in the conservative intellectual movement.

According to Williams, Schuyler’s rejection of Communism drove the other elements of Schuyler’s conservatism, namely his defense of American democracy and capitalism during the early Cold War and his denunciation of black leaders and activists during the 1960s civil rights movement. Williams focuses so heavily on Schuyler’s anti-communism that the finer points of his conservative perspective are lost. Schuyler should not be labeled a conservative because he was anti-communist but rather because his anti-totalitarianism and disillusionment with liberalism led him to favor libertarian ideas about democracy and freedom.

Williams classifies Schuyler as a neoconservative similar to James Burnham and John Dos Passos. To do so misunderstands American

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4 Williams, George S. Schuyler, xii-xiii.
conservatism. In *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, George Nash describes neo-conservatives as former Cold War liberals and anti-Communist Socialists who shifted from the political Left to Right following the upheaval of the 1960s social movements. Associated with Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer and the *Public Interest* magazine, these thinkers’ main focus was domestic policy and also culture. These intellectuals turned away from ideology and were wary of sweeping attempts to reform society and solve social problems through state action. However, they remained liberals in that they did not call for reducing government, and in general were not as opposed to the state as were libertarians like Goldwater who Schuyler openly supported. The second wave consisted of Democratic Party activists and those around *Commentary* magazine who felt the party was moving too far Left during the late 1960s and early 1970s. They too were staunchly anti-Communist, pro-labor, and the most insistent on promoting democracy while fighting Communism. This wave included Norman Podhoretz, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Elliott Abrams.⁵

Although Schuyler may have shared the neo-conservative tendency to shift from the Left to the Right, he abandoned liberalism during the 1930s, long before the onset of the Cold War and the cultural upheaval of the 1960s. He advocated a reduction of government interference in the lives of citizens, which he believed opened the door for totalitarianism. If anything, his views identify him

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as a libertarian. Furthermore, his rigid support for McCarthy and membership in the John Birch Society are more consistent with far-right conservatism during the late 1950s and early 1960s, then with the later neo-conservative movements of the 1970s and 1980s.

Jeffrey Leak’s *Race(e)ing To The Right* also charted Schuyler’s intellectual development from Socialist to Bircher in his collection of essays. Leak identifies 1950 as the point of Schuyler’s intellectual transition. In his introduction, Leak identifies Schuyler as a conservative. He interprets the journalist’s intellectual critique of New Deal liberalism, defense of free enterprise as the solution to racial inequality, opposition to totalitarianism and the communist threat, and faith in individual self-determination as conservative principles. He too fails to situate Schuyler in the historical context of the conservative intellectual movement during this time. Although Leak’s analysis is helpful in identifying Schuyler as a conservative, it does not specify what kind of a conservative Schuyler was.

In his study of the American conservative intellectual movement, historian George Nash identifies “‘classical liberals’, or ‘libertarians’” in the post-World War II period by their conservative resistance “to the threat of the ever expanding State to liberty, private enterprise, and individualism.” However in his history of American Conservatism as a political theory, Brian Farmer contests conflating the two ideas. He argues that although classical liberalism and libertarianism are

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6 Leak, “Introduction.”
related, within Libertarianism the “basic premises and fundamental centers of attention have been altered from the focus of Classic Liberalism on the free market to a primary focus instead on individual choice.”

This important theoretical distinction allows for a more specific understanding of Schuyler as a libertarian. For the purposes of this essay, libertarianism will be defined as a political idea that celebrates the rights and freedoms of the individual, subscribes to a utilitarian view of morality, places a premium on the free market as the solution to social problems, and views all forms of authoritarian systems with the potential for tyranny, such as democracy, organized religion, and moralism, with skepticism and contempt.

Upon closer examination of Schuyler’s views, it becomes clear that he is most accurately understood as a libertarian. Furthermore, Schuyler did not wake up one morning and decide to be a conservative. He embraced libertarian ideas about race, economic freedom and the rights of the individual early on and remained consistent in these views throughout his fifty-five year career as a writer and social critic. His story, like that of his mentor H.L. Mencken, is one of a libertarian remaining a libertarian while the political climate around him changed. It is a story of continuity much more than disconnectedness, the way previous scholars have presented it.

This thesis will show that Schuyler consistently embraced a libertarian viewpoint. Race was an important theme in Schuyler’s work throughout his

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career. Chapter 1 will establish how Schuyler’s libertarian views informed his initial understanding of race relations and their consequences for American society during the 1920s. These were important issues to the black community, and he regularly addressed them in his work for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a liberal black newspaper. He also dealt with these issues in the *American Mercury*, a magazine that popularized a “life-is-a-circus type of cynicism”\(^9\) during the 1920s but grew conservative during the 1930s and moved to the far right in the post-war years.\(^10\) His work for these publications is important because it gave him notoriety and intellectual credibility among both black and white audiences.

Chapter 2 will explore Schuyler’s relationship with his mentor and fellow libertarian H.L. Mencken during the 1930s. Mencken’s influence shaped Schuyler’s literary style and informed his critique of American culture and democracy. Schuyler and Mencken shared a sense of disillusionment with New Deal liberalism and an opposition to U.S. entry into World War II. Comparing their respective approaches to these topics can clarify the intellectual nature of their relationship as well as inform an understanding of libertarianism. This chapter will also trace the relationship between libertarianism and Schuyler’s criticisms of the Communist Left and New Deal liberalism.

Chapter 3 will situate Schuyler’s libertarian ideals and activism within the conservative intellectual movement as it grew after World War II. Contextualizing

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Schuyler alongside the conservative thinkers he associated with, such as James Burnham and William F. Buckley, Jr., will further clarify the ideological relationship between the different strains of conservative thought in the post-World War II period. It will also highlight Schuyler’s unique contribution to the larger conservative intellectual movement after World War II.

George Schuyler was an important figure in American intellectual history whose conservatism crossed racial lines. Although he may be best known for his radical anti-communism and far-right wing views of his later career, he was one of the foremost critics of American race relations. Throughout his distinguished career as a public intellectual, satirist, critic, journalist and newspaper editor Schuyler enhanced the public debates concerning American race and democracy with his controversial voice and dissenting opinions. Although historians have separately dealt with him as an African American intellectual and also as a conservative, his role as an African American intellectual within the predominantly white American conservative intellectual movement has been undervalued. Scholars of American conservatism have typically identified Schuyler as a conservative, and mentioned him in passing as the token African American conservative member of an organization or signer of a conservative petition for the purposes of demonstrating the heterogeneity of the conservative movement, and rarely probe his views in great detail. George Nash mentions Schuyler only once in his respected history of the conservative intellectual
movement.\textsuperscript{11} Others do not mention him at all.\textsuperscript{12} Understanding Schuyler within the context of the conservative intellectual movement after World War II is a valuable undertaking that can deepen our historical knowledge of conservative views of race and the diversity of American conservatism.


CHAPTER 2: THE TWENTIES

Radicalism is a relative term and three decades hence may pronounce the radicals of today as the reactionaries of tomorrow.\(^{13}\) – The Messenger, 1919

George S. Schuyler was born on February 25, 1895 to two African American parents in Rhode Island. Following the death of his father, George Francis Schuyler, the young Schuyler and his mother Eliza relocated to Syracuse, New York to live with Helen, his maternal grandmother. The Schuyler family came from the Albany-Troy area of upstate New York. His paternal great-grandfather fought under General Philip Schuyler during the Revolutionary War. His mother Eliza could trace her ancestry to Madagascar with American origins in a racially diverse family from New York and New Jersey. Eliza later remarried, and in his autobiography, Schuyler credited his stepfather, Joseph Brown, as being the dominant male figure during his early years.\(^{14}\)

In his autobiography, Schuyler described his childhood as a period of instruction in racial pride and the “conservative viewpoint of his [my] parents and family.” He wrote that,

I learned very early in life that I was colored but from the beginning this fact of life did not distress, restrain of overburden me. One takes things as they are, lives with them, and tries to turn them to one’s advantage or seeks another locale where the opportunities are more favorable.\(^{15}\)

\(^{13}\) Editorial, The Messenger, March 1919, p. 22.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 2.
In addition, his family history encouraged him to take pride in his Northern and free ancestry. He remarked that,

My folks boasted of having been free as far back as any of them could or wanted to remember, and they haughtily looked down upon those who had been in servitude. They neither cherished nor sang slave songs. Such prejudices did not die among Northern Negroes until after World War I and the in-rush of Southern migrants. Many regarded the latter as illiterate, ignorant, ill-bred, and amoral; as people with whom they neither had nor wanted anything to do.  

Schuyler's free ancestry, in which he claimed no slave descendents, encouraged him to adopt a distant view of African American enslavement and a condescending attitude towards the American South. Even as Schuyler acknowledged the impact of slavery and America’s racial caste system throughout his career, his early faith in personal responsibility and his family’s history of freedom nonetheless informed his conception of race and racial identity.

Schuyler’s mother and grandmother introduced him to books at an early age. Although Eliza was a woman of modest education, she had a love of learning and literature that she shared with her son. In his autobiography, Schuyler recalled that she often read him the poetry of Longfellow, Tennyson and Kipling, and encouraged him to read anything from the newspapers to selections from their small home library. Of note was an illustrated copy of The Black Phalanx, a historical account of African American soldiers and sailors. The book left Schuyler with the impression that “no colored child could harbor any feeling of inferiority” after reading such a glorious account of blacks in

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16 Ibid., 3-4.
American history.\textsuperscript{17} This thirst for knowledge stayed with Schuyler, shaping his faith in self-education.

Throughout his life, Schuyler questioned religious faith, again inspired by his mother who, although religious, was not a regular churchgoer. Above all, she was skeptical of the mixture of Christianity, superstition, witchcraft and animism practiced by Schuyler’s grandmother and other members of the black community at the turn of the century. According to Schuyler, Eliza not only denounced Helen’s occult beliefs as the product of superstition and ignorance but also, “chided her for believing in Christianity and occultism at one and the same time.”\textsuperscript{18} In doing so, she inspired him to be skeptical and probe the beliefs held by others.

At the turn of the century, Syracuse was a Northeastern industrial manufacturing center with a large European immigrant population. It claimed a rich history of abolitionism, but racial tensions existed. For most blacks, income was low and employment opportunities were limited to unskilled labor and domestic service. They competed with immigrants for these jobs and as a result, faced discrimination in labor unions and second-class citizenship in the work place. Unlike many of his peers, George was raised in an integrated middle-class neighborhood. Schuyler’s stepfather worked as a hotel chef and his mother as a domestic servant for wealthy white families. They were among the upper strata of African American society in Syracuse. The stable

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 22, 48.
financial environment Schuyler experienced was governed by a belief in the Protestant work ethic dictating that an individual’s hard work yields economic gain.\textsuperscript{19}

The limited job opportunities available to African Americans convinced Schuyler to drop out of high school and enlist in the U.S. Army at 17. Between 1912 and 1915, he was stationed at Fort Lawton outside of Seattle, Washington before being transferred to the Shofield Barracks near Honolulu, Hawai’i. Schuyler was honorably discharged in July 1915, but remained in the South Pacific islands as a civilian. He worked on an Army transport, which permitted him to travel abroad to Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tokyo, Guam, and Manila where he experienced different cultures. However, Schuyler found civilian life economically unstable, and he reenlisted in November 1915. In 1916, he was promoted to corporal.

The United States entered World War I in April 1917. Under pressure from black leaders, Secretary of War Newton Baker authorized the creation of a separate officers’ training camp for African Americans at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. Schuyler was among the inaugural group of candidates selected for officer training, most of whom were drawn from among the African American middle-class elite. After four months of training, he received his officer commission and was promoted to first lieutenant of infantry. Schuyler was honorably discharged in 1919 as World War I came to a close.

Although he never served in combat, his years in the U.S. Army shaped Schuyler’s intellectual development. In his memoirs, Schuyler recalled that military life

taught him personal discipline and organizational skills. But as a black soldier, he also experienced racism and racial hostility from white officers and native Hawaiians. In his memoirs, Schuyler provided harrowing examples of his personal encounters with violent altercations between black soldiers and local civilians both on the mainland and the Hawaiian Islands, as well as discrimination in infantry and officer training programs. When he joined the military, Schuyler had naively believed that serving his country would give him greater social mobility and insulate him from racism. However, Schuyler's personal experiences during his military service reinforced his already skeptical perspective of American race relations, and heightened his awareness of the social and political power of racial differences.

Following his discharge, Schuyler returned to Syracuse where he worked as a laborer and handy man. His employment schedule afforded him the time to resume his self-education. During this time, he read “Plato’s Republic, books on astronomy and geology, socialist books by Marx, Engels, Plechanov, Kautsky, Hyndman, Bellamy, Wells, and the works of some of the anarchists.” In search of an outlet for his mental energies, Schuyler joined the Socialist Party of America in 1921. According to his memoirs, the Socialists provided him with the intellectual forum to discuss the ideas he encountered in books such as Paul LaFargue’s The Right To Be Lazy and James Oneal’s The Workers in America, as well as the current events he read about in The Call, a Socialist newspaper.

21 Ibid., 40-43, 47, 51, 64-68, 87.
22 Ibid., 113-118.
Schuyler relocated to Harlem in late 1921. At that time, New York’s Harlem neighborhood was the cosmopolitan center of modern black cultural life. Between 1890 and 1929, the area experienced a substantial increase in population known as the Great Migration. Nearly 1.5 million black Americans left the agrarian South for the industrial North in search of economic opportunities and improved social conditions in urban centers such as New York and Chicago.\(^{23}\) In addition to African American migrants, Harlem also claimed a large population of black West-Indian immigrants. The diversification and mass urbanization of the black population, and the assimilation of Southern and immigrant blacks into Northern culture created cultural tensions and inspired social and political changes within the black community.\(^{24}\)

The black press expanded in both size and strength during the Great Migration. Black periodicals focused on issues of immediate personal interest to African Americans, and afforded the “Negro’s voice” to national and international current events, employment opportunities and local social life, churches and organizations. They also provided a vehicle for grassroots organizations, socialization, and socio-political protest.\(^{25}\) With a broad-based readership consisting of predominantly middle and lower class urban industrial blacks, newspapers claiming a national circulation such

as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Age*, connected the black community across space and time through their content.

World War I also affected the black community. Debates within black society over participation in the war filled the pages of the black press as more than 370,000 black American soldiers risked their lives to aid America’s war effort in Europe. Many members of the black community, including renowned leader W.E.B. Du Bois, supported black participation in the war, believing it would awaken America to the hypocrisy of fighting a war for democracy abroad while maintaining an oppressive racial caste system at home. Socialist labor leader A. Philip Randolph opposed the “imperialist war”. Following the Socialist Party line, he argued that blacks had no reason to fight for democracy overseas when they did not have it at home. Regardless of which position individual members of the black community may have adopted, the issue inspired a rising sense of political consciousness within the general population.

As the “intellectual and artistic capital of the Negro world,” Harlem served as the physical center of the heated ideological, social and political debates over the relationship between race, nation and culture taking place within the black community after World War I. Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual.*, 21. The creative intelligentsia comprised of black intellectuals, artists and activists located in Harlem reinvigorated explorations of black American identity and crafted new strategies to achieve full racial equality in American life on a national scale. The distinct literary, intellectual and cultural movement that surrounded the neighborhood became known as the Harlem Renaissance.

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The most important symbol born of the Harlem Renaissance was the “New Negro.” The term indicated the arrival of modernity in the African American community. Coined by writer Alain Locke, “New Negro” described a rising sense of group cultural consciousness among young blacks. The New Negro embodied racial consciousness, black sophistication, self-awareness, intellectual advance and liberation from the psychological wounds suffered under slavery in America. “The development of a more positive self-respect and self-reliance,” would necessarily follow the New Negro’s psychic freedom.27 This positive self-image required a mentality freed from the sense of inferiority and dependence imposed by white supremacy.

The Negro today wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not. He resents being spoken of as a social ward or minor, even by his own, and to being regarded a chronic patient for the sociological clinic, the sick man of American Democracy.28

Black intellectuals hailed the idea as a distinctly modern black cultural symbol that signaled the death of Old Negro stereotypes like Uncle Tom, Sambo and Aunt Jemima. Understanding the identity and implications of the “New Negro” archetype in a national and international context became a central focus of the cultural debates within the Harlem Renaissance.29

28 Ibid., 4.
Schuyler settled into this milieu and began attending meetings of the Friends of Negro Freedom, a forum for intellectual discussion originally founded to support the “Garvey Must Go” campaign by fellow Socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen. They invited him to join the staff of *The Messenger*, a black political and literary magazine dedicated to “scientific Socialism”, which they co-edited.

A. Philip Randolph interpreted the black struggle for equality as “an indigenous movement for social and economic change.” Rejecting the violent ideology of the Communists, he argued that unconditional equality could be achieved through a peaceful socialist revolution. Randolph’s focus was on an interracial movement of American workers, rather than an international one made up of workers around the world. He believed that foreign programs for economic revolution were ignorant to the realities of black life in America and on those grounds, opposed affiliation with the Third International in Moscow as well as the African Blood Brotherhood, a communist group led by West-Indian immigrant Cyril Briggs. To this end, he organized African American laborers, notably Pullman car porters, behind a “brand of socialism that would emancipate the workers of America and institute a just economic system.”

*The Messenger* reflected these views in its approach to black racial and cultural identity. In the magazine’s mission statement, Randolph and Owen wrote that,

Our aim is to appeal to reason, to lift our pens above the cringing demagogy of the times, and above the cheap peanut politics of the old reactionary Negro leaders. Patriotism has no appeal to us; justice has. Party has no weight with us; principle has. Loyalty is meaningless; it depends on what one is loyal to. Prayer is not one of our remedies; it depends on what one is praying for. We consider  

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prayer as nothing more than a fervent wish; consequently the merit and worth of a prayer depend upon what the fervent wish is.\textsuperscript{31}

*The Messenger* understood racism as a byproduct of a capitalist economic system, insisted on the American heritage of African Americans, and called for interracial worker solidarity. Above all, the magazine advocated “economic emancipation through cooperation,” meaning that the best hope for equality was for “organized labor to harness the discontent of Negroes and direct it into the working-class channels for working-class emancipation.”\textsuperscript{32}

*The Messenger* introduced readers to George Schuyler as a “resourceful student of modern economic, political and social problems,” who dared to “proclaim the shortcomings of the existing social order and with scholarly patience through scientific exposition, seek to guide the tortured and exploited masses to a better world.”\textsuperscript{33} This he did in a monthly satirical column entitled “Shafts and Darts: A Calumny and Satire” that addressed current issues within the black community. He quickly graduated from columnist to editor and also contributed articles and profiles of prominent black figures. Schuyler’s writing for the magazine reflected *The Messenger*’s socialist viewpoint. In an essay from 1923 entitled “Economics and Politics,” he argued that capitalists controlled the two major political parties. These parties represented their own private interests,


not those of the workers, white or black. Voting for either of these parties would not yield economic or political change because the interests of the workers were diametrically opposed to those of the capitalists. He declared that, “only by economic organization much similar to that of the owners, can the workers combat the evils confronting them.”

Schuyler’s tenure at the Messenger was important for several reasons. First, the experience allowed Schuyler to become intimately familiar with socialism and communism and evaluate their potential for success in the United States. Second, it informed his interpretation of racial identity and racism as social constructions with their origins in capitalism. Third, it contributed to Schuyler’s insistence on the “Americanness” of African Americans in his analysis of black culture and cultural nationalism during the Harlem Renaissance. Although he moved away from socialism as the ultimate solution by the end of the 1920s, he retained a materialist framework for interpreting the problem of American racial inequality into the 1930s. Finally, and most importantly, writing for The Messenger exposed him to Harlem’s intellectual circles and the ongoing cultural debates taking place among prominent black leaders. His interactions with Harlem’s black elite allowed him to enter the debate and ascertain firsthand knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses within black leadership.

Although his work for The Messenger gained Schuyler notoriety, it paid little. The magazine was plagued by financial difficulties, and he earned no more

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than ten dollars a week. For this reason, Schuyler accepted an offer to write a weekly column on the modern black American experience for the Pittsburgh Courier for three dollars per week in 1924. The Courier introduced Schuyler to readers as a realist, who “approaches his subject with the objectivity of the true and reliable observer, leaning more toward science than sentiment.”

Whereas The Messenger was a polemical magazine that directed its scientific socialism to a niche audience of black labor and Leftist intellectuals, the Courier was more liberal than left and catered to a national black audience with diverse political, social, and economic worldviews. Under editor Robert L. Vann and business manager Ira F. Lewis, it claimed to have the “largest audited and proved circulation of any colored newspaper in America.” While actual readership numbers are difficult to quantify given that most people read the paper and passed it on to others, it is safe to say that the Pittsburgh Courier rivaled other national African American newspapers such as the Chicago Defender. In 1927, Eugene Gordon ranked the Courier as the best all-around newspaper in the country. Although readers looked to the Courier for feature stories and news reports, the newspaper was nationally known for its “special columns (such as Schuyler’s “Views and Reviews”) and its editorials.”

Schuyler’s column for the Courier resembled “Shafts and Darts” in its format and subject matter. He brought to “Views and Reviews” his caustic wit.

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38 Ibid., 253.
while analyzing American politics, culture, and race relations. The satirical attacks on a familiar cast of characters that included American democracy, capitalism, moral reformists and black leaders such as Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois also continued. The new project was originally entitled “This Simian World” but three weeks later he changed the title to “Thrusts and Lunges.” Finally, he settled on “Views and Reviews” in October 1925. The column retained this name until Schuyler’s dismissal in 1966. “Views and Reviews” served as Schuyler’s forum for discussions of current economic, social, cultural and political issues.

**Capitalism, Collectivism or Both?**

In the 1920s, capitalism broadly referred to the type of market economy in which privately owned means of production influenced economic activity. American capitalism after World War I was characterized by industrial mass (over)production of goods, the creation of the “mass consumer” through advertising, the rise of welfare capitalism and the stock market, and consolidation of economic and political power among “big business” corporations. For African Americans, American capitalism in the 1920s translated into limited economic, social and political opportunities. Schuyler worried about the state of the black working class, or black masses, that made up the majority of the race’s labor
force. In “Views and Reviews,” he often addressed their depressed economic status of average, working class black Americans.

The position of the Negro workman is precarious, faced as they are with industrial segregation and discrimination, the trend to trustification, lack of capital, small banks, difficulty of getting credit, the failure of the Hampton-Tuskegee program…and the industrial competition between white and black labor for unskilled and domestic work.  

These conditions were compounded by the replacement of skilled laborers with industrial machinery. Schuyler feared that labor displacement would further concentrate money and power in the hands of a few wealthy capitalists and threaten the economic survival of the black community. Greater competition between whites and blacks for fewer skilled jobs meant the possibility that existing racism and discrimination would increase and raise the potential for racial violence. More importantly, fewer skilled industrial jobs meant reduced income and less job security for black laborers. Lower income for the working classes also meant that small business owners, who could not afford to compete with larger conglomerates, would suffer.

As the Negro’s working conditions become precarious and money scarce, he loses all the race patriotism he had – if any – and spends his money where it will go the farthest, i.e. at the chain store. Now it is only a matter of time before all small businesses will be forced to bow to the chain store and the trust. This is true of small Negro business as well as small white business.  

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40 Ibid.
Although Schuyler still believed that, “economic advancement is the foundation upon which all other advancement is erected,” he had moved away from the standard socialist position that an interracial labor movement would achieve a gradual economic revolution. Instead, he encouraged blacks to use “the very color which is a handicap in business and industry today” to their advantage. In his Courier columns, Schuyler began to explore the possibilities for racial equality under capitalism; experimenting with aspects of black conservative Booker T. Washington’s idea of a black group economy and W.E.B. Du Bois’ solution of collectivization based on consumer cooperatives. Schuyler shared Washington’s sense that the growth of black-owned businesses would ensure the economic survival of the black community.

Unlike Washington who focused on the creation of a black middle class, Schuyler was more interested in industrial working class black consumers. He argued that consumption offered individual African Americans a rational solution towards economic success and racial equality that was simultaneously empowering and practicable. By realizing their “tremendous purchasing power,”

they could “wield great economic power if and when they buy collectively as a service to themselves.” Instead of protests or boycotts, individual black consumers would do better to simply purchase goods from black businesses rather than white ones. According to Schuyler, “this is the scientific way of solving the race question – not by begging for alms, but by building for ourselves.” His hope was to empower blacks on a local level and encourage economic stability by making them aware of the relationship between an individual’s decisions in the market and his political agency.

Schuyler’s solution for black economic marginalization during the 1920s reflected a libertarian belief that political and economic liberty could result from the creation of new markets for investment. Influencing the individual’s purchasing habits offered a good entry point, but Schuyler recognized the need for a long-term solution that generated capital and created new markets for African American investment. Consumer co-operatives, which aimed to “obtain the advantages of wholesale buying for the individual purchaser of the necessities of living,” offered a perfect solution. Schuyler envisioned a system where individual African Americans invested in small, black-owned businesses by buying their goods from black-owned retailers and by purchasing ownership shares of these enterprises. The benefits were obvious to Schuyler. “If there was a consumers cooperation society in every Negro community,” he observed,

46 George Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” Pittsburgh Courier, August 22, 1925.
“this two billion dollars worth of business would be handled of, by and for Negroes; whatever profits were derived would be divided among the consumers themselves and the economic enterprises would be manned by Negroes.” By keeping the (much needed) cash flow within the black community, cooperatives would immediately provide valuable job opportunities and eventually enable blacks to accumulate control of capital wealth equal with whites.

These were the principles behind the Young Negroes Co-operative League (YNCL), which Schuyler founded in 1930. Managed by future civil rights activist Ella Baker, the YNCL organized and trained local consumer cooperatives to own and operate retail outlets in urban black neighborhoods. Cooperatives resembled a publicly traded company on the stock market. Each store or commercial enterprise was owned by stock-owning shareholders and overseen by an elected Board of Directors. Store profits were refunded to members based on how many shares they owned. Members could also trade shares with each other. Unlike the stock market where each share equals a vote, stakeholders received one vote each regardless of how many shares an individual owned. According to Schuyler, this precluded the possibility for a tyranny of the minority.

Schuyler's cooperatives should not be confused with the black group economy advocated by Booker T. Washington. Although he drew on the tradition of self-help that Washington made famous, Schuyler disagreed that the independent development of black economic enterprises could be racially segregated. Schuyler realized that convincing poor blacks to buy from black-

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owned stores, which often charged higher prices than their white counterparts, presented a challenge. However, he abhorred white paternalism and believed that accepting financial or material donations from sympathetic whites amounted to no more than an admission of black inferiority. Instead, he fostered interracial cooperation between white wholesalers and black co-ops. Coordinating with white wholesalers for access to lower cost products would allow black retailers to offer competitively priced goods to their consumers. In theory, this interracial effort would inform African American purchasing decisions, generate business for black small-business owners and stimulate black economic development in poverty stricken urban neighborhoods hit hard by the Great Depression.48

Ultimately, the YNCL attempted to impart a pragmatic lesson on the inner workings of capitalist markets and democratic practice and with the hope they could later use this knowledge to their advantage. Schuyler hoped that consumer cooperatives would teach the youth to “think straight on all economic and social matters” and enable the next generation of African Americans to “see more clearly the actual world in which they live and to better make their way in it.”49 The YNCL established branches in more than twenty cities nationwide, but in 1934, the organization dissolved due to mismanagement, bankruptcy and a lack of interest from the black community.

49 Handsell Bell, “Interview with George Schuyler,” Palmetto Leader, 1931.
Although he was a critic of American capitalism throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, the formation of the YNCL indicated that Schuyler had begun to consider the possibilities for capitalism as a palliative cure for racial inequality. At the same time a co-operative solution to racial inequality implies that Schuyler was still more of a collectivist than an individualist, it also reveals underlying libertarian attitudes towards capitalism. Libertarians tend to defend capitalism on the grounds that it offers solutions to social inequality. They often argue that a capitalist system increases the ability of the individuals to succeed by creating markets for investment where they can generate capital by purchasing shares of wealth created by a given enterprise. When he founded the YNCL, Schuyler adapted these principles to suit the single goal of racial equality shared by all African American individuals. Modeling the YNCL after a modern stock exchange, he created a niche market for African Americans to invest their support and money in black-owned enterprises. In doing so, each individual investor collected returns in the form of immediate cash profits but more importantly, the future freedom and economic prosperity of their local communities.

Race: The Great American Myth

Author Ayn Rand captured the libertarian perspective on race and racism writing that,
Racism is the lowest most crudely primitive form of collectivism. It is the notion of ascribing moral, social, or political significance to a man's genetic lineage—the notion that a man's intellectual and characterological traits are produced and transmitted by his internal body chemistry. Which means, in practice, that a man is to be judged, not by his own character and actions, but by the characters and actions of his ancestors.⁵⁰

The unscientific nature of racial determinism and emphasis on individualism was clear in Schuyler’s views on race and racism during the 1920s. He believed that America’s race problem derived from a notion of race as a rigid social category that determined the identity of an individual. The possibility of racial equality would only exist once the concept of race was eliminated as a social category. He argued that this would only be possible when blacks were able to prove their economic equality with whites. The attainment of full political rights for African Americans, which he believed “reflected the economic life of the community,” would naturally follow.

Schuyler argued that (so-called) race was a social construction and not genetically predetermined: strip away the social and economic influences, and you were left with American citizens of different skin pigmentation but equal humanity. In an edition of “Views and Reviews” he remarked that, “the so-called Negro is just an American like all of his fellows, white and yellow and black. Behavior patterns and sartorial standards are not made by color, but by environment.”⁵¹ It was the individual and his lived experience, not predetermined

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caste, culture or color, which distinguished people from one another. Any other
explanation defied reason. Therefore, it was “a pretty good policy not to think so
much about a person’s color and to think more about his or her character.”

Schuyler interpreted racism and Jim Crow as reflections of the corrupt
economic interests of white capitalists. White supremacy and black inequality
operated as ideological devices to maintain capitalist hierarchy by convincing
African Americans that they were inherently worth less than their white
counterparts. This hierarchy was reinforced by mythic stereotypes whites
created that depicted “the Negro as an inferior sort of being, part clown, part
criminal and part imbecile.” Rather than complain, Schuyler focused his efforts
on, “ridding Negroes of an inhibiting sense of inferiority and Nordics of a foolish
sense of superiority.”

He marveled at “the amazing ignorance of whites” concerning the
color of blacks. Schuyler regularly reiterated the sentiment that “the
American Negro is merely human, like all other Americans.” But the
persistence with which whites misconceived their black counterparts frustrated
Schuyler because they limited black efforts towards full equality. In his columns,
essays and editorials directed at interracial audiences, Schuyler appealed to
sympathetic white liberals by exposing the damage inflicted on America’s
economic progress by a racialized worldview. His favorite targets were Jim

Crow laws in the South, which he saw as economically inefficient above all else.

In his first article for the *American Mercury* entitled “Our White Folks”, Schuyler appraised the absurdity of white racial attitudes. He remarked that,

the Negro marvels that they [whites] go to the expense of a dual school system, Jim-crow railroad coaches and waiting rooms, separate cemeteries, and segregated parks, libraries and street cars, with the obvious economic waste entailed, when the two people are so intimately associated all day, not to mention at night…The South, the Negro does not fail to note, has actually retarded its own progress by maintaining this hypocritical double standard.\(^56\)

Schuyler countered black inferiority by emphasizing the abilities and achievements of African American individuals. His underlying hope was that inspiring a healthy self-confidence, sense of pride and self worth within the black community would encourage individual blacks to succeed. He wrote in the *Courier* that,

The average white man knows the average Negro is his equal and very often his superior. That is the reason why he limits the Negro’s sphere of activity. One does not seek to handicap and hamstring one’s inferiors; one doesn’t purchase a cannon to shoot pigeons.\(^57\)

Negative black stereotypes also reflected white sexual insecurities. According to Schuyler, “they realize that given free rein, the Negroes would very likely be running the country in less than half a century.” “The fear of economic and political competition is a factor,” he continued, “but above it is the bogey of sex competition. Equality in one field will unquestionably lead to equality in the

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\(^{57}\) George Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 3, 1926.
other.” As evidence of white fears of black virility, Schuyler referenced anti-miscegenation legislation, racial integrity laws, and the “one-drop” theory popular in the social sciences that stated that a person with one black ancestor in their bloodline, no matter how far removed, was considered black under the law. He found this last point particularly ridiculous, arguing that not one American citizen could honestly claim they did not have one black relative in their genealogy. For Schuyler, the fact that these laws only applied to black blood (one white ancestor was not enough to make a person white under the law) was a laughable offense and only demonstrated white sexual obsession, insecurity and ignorance. In more serious critiques, he attacked racial purity laws as antithetical to basic American principles of democracy and without scientific foundation. Such laws were repressive and moralistic. In an article for *The Modern Monthly* he declared anti-miscegenation legislation to be a “travesty on democracy,” that maintained “the system of exploitation based on color which exists almost everywhere in this country.”

In his work for the *Courier*, Schuyler supported amalgamation (the biological merger of the two races) and interracial marriage as the ultimate expression of integration of the races. For all the existing laws prohibiting interracial unions, government enforcement of sexual morality was ineffective. Writing in “Views and Reviews,” Schuyler contended that, “there is a biological

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attraction of whites and blacks for each other. It is too obvious for dispute...Were it not for social taboos and legal enactments, there would be more mixing between the whites and blacks." His autobiography reflected his beliefs when, in 1928, he married a white woman named Josephine Codgell. The birth of Schuyler's daughter Philippa Duke Schuyler in 1931 supported his belief that no significant biological differences existed between the races. According to Schuyler, "any physically normal child can perform impressively in almost any field, if stimulated and encouraged. So-called race has nothing to do with it, nor has nationality. The racial complexes are too often built in by parents and relatives. Individualism is an important thing." A biracial child genius and music prodigy (she played and composed for piano), Philippa's intellectual abilities further reinforced Schuyler's contention that black inferiority was a social myth.

**Separation of Race and the American State: Marcus Garvey**

Although African Americans and Caucasian-Americans claimed different skin tones, for Schuyler, the fact remained that both races were united by a shared American heritage. It is not surprising then, that Schuyler was skeptical of separatist movements that suggested African Americans abandon the United

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61 George Schuyler, "Views & Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 6, 1926.
States. His opposition to separatism as a solution to the American race problem is most evident in his critique of Marcus Garvey’s Black Nationalism. In general, Schuyler refused to accept that a group’s shared racial condition took priority over the individual’s national or cultural ties. He argued that an individual’s unique cultural experiences could not and should not be disinherit in order to establish a nation built on race.

Garvey ascended as a powerful and influential leader in the black community after World War I. Of West-Indian origins, Garvey believed racism existed “not because there is a difference between us in religion or in colour, but because there is a difference in power.” Having rejected the possibility that whites could sacrifice the power necessary to overcome their racism, Garvey advocated separation of the races along geographic lines. “If Europe is for the white man, if Asia is for brown and yellow men, then surely Africa is for the black man.” From Garvey’s millennialist (if not apocalyptic) perspective, the only hope for collective survival and emancipation of the black race was a mass international emigration to Africa, where an independent black state would be established.

64 Negro World, February 24, 1923.
According to Garvey, African Americans needed “power of every kind. POWER in education, science, industry, politics and higher government. That kind of power that will stand out signally, so that other races and nations can see, and if they will not see, then FEEL.” His philosophy of racial empowerment stimulated a longing for a utopian vision of a black paradise in which blacks could find freedom from racial discrimination in American life.

Capitalizing on the growing disillusionment and frustration with American life among American Negroes, Garvey built an entire subculture around his Back-to-Africa platform. In 1914 he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) with the goal to liberate black nationals across the world from white oppression. Garvey established UNIA branches and cooperative enterprises across the country. He also published the *Negro World*, which served as UNIA’s official communication. As leader of UNIA, Garvey negotiated a land purchase with Liberia to establish the Empire of Africa, a separate black state. He designed a state flag, hired a mercenary corps and constructed a formal political system of officials, advisors, and nobles over which he ruled as the self-appointed provisional President of Africa. In 1919, he purchased a fleet of steamships named the Black Star Line. His three ships, the *Yarmouth*, the *Shadyside* and the *Kanawha* became international symbols for black enterprise. Estimates of the organization’s membership, composed mostly of impoverished

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West-Indian immigrants and black industrial laborers who had recently migrated to the North, ranged from 1 million to 6 million at its peak in 1921.⁶⁸

Garvey’s relationships with black intellectuals in Harlem were tenuous. When he first arrived in the United States in 1916, he quickly immersed himself in prominent black intellectual circles. At first, he enjoyed the support of influential leader A. Philip Randolph. Garvey was a charismatic leader with an uncanny ability to organize the black masses and Randolph believed he could harness that ability to aid his Socialist goals. They worked together in the International League of Darker Peoples, to advocate representation for colonized nations at the Versailles peace conference. Randolph also cooperated with Garvey to organize black laborers in the Harlem community, and in 1919 addressed a UNIA meeting to educate the membership on the relationship between class struggle and the Negro Problem.⁶⁹

By late 1920, any loose sense of solidarity had all but disappeared. Although Randolph, endorsing the socialist party line, had supported liberation of Africa from European colonial powers and international racial solidarity of minority races against white domination, he was hardly Afrocentric. Randolph believed that black Americans, after 300 years on American soil, were products of the American historical and cultural conditions, experiences and institutions in which they lived. While Randolph was initially able to acknowledge Garvey’s

achievements in organizing the black community and reinvigorating its self-respect, he nonetheless opposed Garvey’s Back-to-Africa solution. Randolph denounced Garvey as the “supreme Jackass from Jamaica” whose impractical views misunderstood American race relations and ignored the historical realities of the African American experience.

Although Randolph and Du Bois initially believed that Garvey’s plans for a black state in Africa were unrealistic, poorly planned and ill managed, they viewed him more as a nuisance than a real threat. Their concern increased following federal inquiries into UNIA finances and W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1921 expose of the Black Star Line’s finances. The investigations led Randolph to believe that Garvey had misappropriated funds and donations he received from his supporters. Then in June 1922, Garvey met with the Imperial Wizard of the Klan during a tour of the South. His intent was to unite UNIA and Klan efforts to preserve racial purity and establish white America for white people and Black Africa for black people. For Randolph, this was the last straw.

Garvey had threatened not only the elite status of black intellectuals as community leaders, but also the “intra-racial and interracial harmony” they had worked to establish. In July 1922, The Messenger embarked on a vicious smear campaign against Garvey. The magazine’s editors called to

all ministers, editors, and lecturers who have the interests of the race at heart to gird up their courage, put on new force, and proceed with might

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and main to drive the menace of Garveyism out of this country…Here’s notice that the MESSENGER is firing the opening gun in a campaign to drive Garvey and Garveyism in all its sinister viciousness from the American soil.\textsuperscript{72}

A coalition of liberal and Left black intellectuals that included W.E.B. Du Bois and Eugene Gordon, united against Garvey and his movement. Led by Randolph, they dismissed Garvey as a fraudulent and corrupt demagogue whose plan of a mass exodus of blacks to Africa was in fact “colonialism in reverse”.

Randolph summarized the collective critique in a \textit{Messenger} editorial saying,

\begin{quote}
His opposition to social equality is abominable. His African Empire dream is obsolete and undesirable. His “Negro first” policy is not defensible, is unsound in theory and in practice. His steamship line is not only impracticable, but would have no effect on the Negro problem if successfully established, because the Negro problem is not one of transportation.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

In 1923, Chandler Owen and seven other prominent black community members sent a concerned letter to Attorney General Daugherty charging Garvey as an enemy of the state. Ironically, they urged Daugherty to deport Garvey in the name of protecting American democratic values, most notably free speech.\textsuperscript{74}

The U.S. government tried and convicted Garvey on charges of mail fraud. After being imprisoned for two years in Atlanta, GA, Garvey was deported. He spent the remainder of his life exiled in England. Without Garvey, the UNIA went bankrupt and collapsed.

\textsuperscript{72} George Schuyler and Theophilus Lewis, “Shafts and Darts,” \textit{The Messenger}, March 1925.

\textsuperscript{73} “Garvey Unfairly Attacked” \textit{The Messenger}, April 1922

Schuyler adopted Randolph’s line of criticism concerning Garvey during his time at the *Messenger* and his engagement with the Friends of Negro Freedom. Long after Garvey had left American soil, Schuyler continued to lambast him in “Views and Reviews.” Schuyler believed that Garvey, having no capacity for real leadership, overemphasized race, cultivated hatred for whites and inspired false hope to exhort its members, many of them poor black laborers. In Schuyler’s estimation, Garvey’s utopian vision of Africa for the Africans ignored the fact that, “however great may be the ills suffered by Negroes in this country, they are as nothing compared to those they would suffer in a strange land, in the midst of a hostile environment.”75 Not only was Garvey an “ignorant, incompetent, egotistical megalomaniac,” but he would bring no more benefit to the black race’s hope for equality than a Klansman.76

For Schuyler, it was a false hope to believe that the quality of life would be better if blacks went “Back-to-Africa” because a physical trait could never be strong enough to unite a country. “The fact is inescapable that we are just Americans. It is the only nation, language and environment we know...American means something! Negro means nothing...neither blackness or whiteness can constitute a stable foundation for nationality.”77 Schuyler believed that Garvey’s black nationalism gave too much weight to race as a biological determinant and ignored the role played by the individual’s environment. To do so overlooked

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76 George Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 12, 1929.
crucial historical connections between African Americans and American cultural life.

Schuyler argued that a distinct Aframerican culture could not exist apart from white culture because both were necessary components in the creation of American culture. Characterizing the American Negro as a, “lampblackened Anglo-Saxon,” he charged that to distinguish the cultures of white and black Americans based on race was “sheer nonsense”. Environmental conditions determined individual character and, “the Aframerican is subject to the same economic and social forces that mold the actions and thoughts of the white American. He is not living in a different world.” Renowned black artists from diverse national backgrounds, such as Claude McKay from Britain and James Weldon Johnson from America, embodied this phenomenon. Their work “shows the impress of nationality rather than race. They all reveal the psychology and culture of their environment – their color is incidental.”

Although this article was published in *The Nation*, the same views could just as easily have been taken from Schuyler’s columns for the *Pittsburgh Courier* during the 1920s, which encouraged readers to take a rational, economic approach to understanding American race relations.

**Strange Bedfellows: Puritanism and the Black Leadership**

Schuyler approached social issues with a scientific methodology that emphasized critical examination of both sides of any issue in the name of free

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inquiry, free publicity and free discussion of ideas and beliefs. Since, “views and opinions should only be retained so long as they hold water,” they should therefore be examined and tested for any holes.⁷⁹ Schuyler rejected views based on blind belief rather than reasoning based on facts. This partially explained his general disdain for moralism and emotionalism; but more specifically, it informed his critique of moral reform legislation and religious zealotry.

In “Views and Reviews” he remarked that, “the land of the free has been a fruitful ground for He Who Uplifts. There are more societies for the betterment of this, that and the other evil, than in any other under the sun.”⁸⁰ He satirized nationalist, religious and racial reform groups that upheld “God as a glorified policeman” and claimed to offer believers salvation in a declining world.

Generally referring to the national reform wave of the post-World War I period that culminated with the passage of Prohibition, Schuyler’s list of Puritanical offenders included the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), Holy Rollers, UNIA, Christian fundamentalists, the Ku Klux Klan, and Anthony Comstock. By imposing virtue, honesty and good Christian morals on American culture through federal law, these organizations aimed to “usher in the Puritan Utopia of pink lemonade, austere countenances, psalm singing and lollipops.”⁸¹ While Schuyler found their moralism irrational and repressive, he was nonetheless able to laugh at their blind ignorance.

⁸¹ Ibid.
Through his criticism, Schuyler hoped to encourage readers to turn a skeptical, if not discerning eye to the world around them. It was with this in mind that he challenged the public image and pronouncements of prominent civil rights leaders throughout his career. Schuyler believed that the role of public intellectuals and race leaders was to lead the attack on socio-economic inequality. In his analysis of the black bourgeoisie, E. Franklin Frazier observed that the power of middle class blacks within the black community derived from its ability to hold “strategic positions in segregated institutions and create and propagate the ideologies current in the Negro community.” 82 The majority of prominent black leaders in Harlem, including Du Bois and Kelly Miller, were educated members of the black middle class. From their position of influence, these black middle class leaders were empowered with the ability to negotiate racial equality on behalf of the marginalized black working class. But rather than fighting for the uplift of their race, Schuyler believed they had adapted black demands for improved social and economic conditions to their own interests.

Schuyler laughed at claims that the Negro bourgeoisie revealed “the soul of their people.” 83 The same black middle class professionals who favored districting the black community along economic lines for their own profit and reinforced the inferiority abilities of the lower working classes were not representative of the black population. In Schuyler’s view, Kelly Miller most closely represented this tradition during the 1920s. Miller worked as a dean at

82 Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie, 77.
83 George Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” Pittsburgh Courier, September 12, 1925.
Howard University in Washington D.C. He was an anti-labor, pro-business intellectual who led the Negro Sanhedrin movement, a nationwide conference that sought to coordinate (but not unite) the activities and programs of disparate civil rights, religious and fraternal organizations throughout the black community. Writing in the *Amsterdam News*, Miller argued that socialism overstated the significance of economic factors. His belief was to:

let the Negro acquire all the wealth he honestly can. Let him practice thrift and economy as an aid to respectable, decent living. Let him accumulate capital and engage in material enterprise as fully as his ineptitude, lack of experience and prejudice will permit. But never let him indulge the vain delusion that money will solve the race problem.

To Schuyler, Miller failed to see “so-called Negroes objectively in the light of modern sociology, economics, and behavior psychology, and as part of a great world problem.” He viewed Miller’s racial apologetics and paternalism as he did Booker T. Washington’s: implausible, narrow and outdated.

Schuyler castigated other liberal black leaders and prominent black fraternal and religious organizations for failing to supply realistic economic solutions to modern racial inequality. He contended that black leaders had abandoned their responsibilities in order to get rich, gain favor with whites, and engage in shameless self-promotion. In 1926, he wrote that, “nine-tenths of our teachers, preachers, business and professional folks are giving lip service to

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equality and kneeling at the shrine of Brother James Crow. This doubtless because the color line is the highway to their pay envelopes. In Schuyler’s opinion, the privileged economic status of the “talented tenth” could not accurately represent the concerns of working class African Americans who worked as laborers or domestic servants. That the ideas of a middle class, intellectual minority could reflect the needs of the impoverished, working class majority was absurd.

Liberal race organizations no less reflected the disparity between the interests of the black middle and working classes. Schuyler believed that the program and policy of the NAACP failed to “cover the problems and need of the Negro masses.” The organization’s social protests and boycotts accomplished little in the way of practical change. Although Schuyler applauded the organization’s efforts to attack racism and segregation in its magazine The Crisis, this propaganda has very little effect on the Negro...If I have seen the dark brother aright, he is primarily interested, North and South, in getting a job, keeping it, making more money, keeping the police off of him and getting bail when they get him, having a good time and making a place for his children.

He counseled the organization to be more democratic and fight for advancement outside of the judicial system. If the NAACP really wanted to help the black masses, Schuyler suggested it supplement its national legal activism with social and economic support for local communities.

87 Schuyler, “Views and Reviews.”
Between 1923 and 1929, George Schuyler established himself as one of the most trusted and popular critics of American race relations. While the *Messenger* introduced Schuyler into black intellectual life, his work for the *Courier* presented him to wide and diverse audience. Through his satirical humor and unrestrained skepticism in “Views and Reviews,” Schuyler earned a reputation as an iconoclast. His middle-class upbringing instilled in him a healthy skepticism towards authoritarian and moral systems, as well as faith in reason, the dignity of the individual, and the virtues of self-help. These values provided the basis for the subtle libertarianism that underscored his ideas about race, culture and the future possibilities for African American success. As Schuyler drifted further away from collectivism into the 1930s, the key traits of a libertarian – individualism, faith in the corrective abilities of the economy, and contempt for repressive authoritarian systems – became more pronounced.
Schuyler’s libertarianism became more prominent during the 1930s and 1940s. The individualism that had been subtle in his work during the 1920s emerged at the forefront of Schuyler’s social criticism, particularly in his hard-line anti-communism and his anti-statist attacks on New Deal liberalism. The developments in Schuyler’s perspective can be attributed in large part to his relationship with H.L. Mencken, his reaction to the Scottsboro Trials and World War II.

Schuyler’s reputation as an outspoken critic of American race relations transcended racial lines. His work for the *Pittsburgh Courier* during the 1920s led to solicitations for essays from popular periodicals read by both white and black audiences. Of the popular magazines Schuyler wrote for, his relationship with *The American Mercury* and its influential founding editor H.L. Mencken was the most significant. Between 1927 and 1933, Schuyler contributed nine essays devoted to different aspects of African American life to *The American Mercury*, making him the single leading contributor during the last six years of Mencken’s editorship.\(^89\)

As Jeffrey Ferguson has shown, Mencken influenced Schuyler’s stylistic and “general intellectual approach”, a fact not lost on Schuyler’s

According to Ferguson, “Mencken provided a methodological clinic in the uses of satire for the outsider in American culture.” Schuyler’s application of irony, parody and satire to his analysis of the African American experience earned him the nickname “the black Mencken” and the “Sage of Sugar Hill” among black intellectuals. Schuyler often repeated Mencken’s trademark phrases in his own work, including “booboisie”, “civilized minority”, “buncombe”, and “debunk,” and his criticisms of religion, morality, Prohibition, rural America and the South clearly indicated an intellectual debt to his mentor.

However, Mencken’s significance in Schuyler’s life and career extended beyond editorial support. As Ferguson rightly concludes, to assume that Schuyler was just imitating Mencken is to overlook “the dynamic of mutual recognition and respect that transpired between them.” Following Schuyler’s first article for the *Mercury* in 1927, the two men developed a strong working relationship that continued until Mencken’s death in 1956. Mencken became one of Schuyler’s most important mentors, encouraging him to be an unforgiving libertarian critic of American culture and democracy.

H.L. Mencken was born in Baltimore, Maryland on September 12, 1880 and raised in a comfortable, middle-class home. His father was a successful, self-made businessman and high-tariff Republican who opposed government regulation, progressive social reform and organized labor. In Mencken’s

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estimation, “the main elements in my body of ideas were picked up as a boy, and largely from my father.” Mencken inherited his father’s religious skepticism and views on politics, business, labor, government, education, immigration, while his mother Anna provided him with emotional support. The insulated bourgeois atmosphere of his youth afforded him the self-confidence and psychic security to challenge the values and mores of Middle America as an adult.

As a journalist, editor, literary critic, political commentator and social pundit, Mencken attacked Puritanism and the genteel tradition in American life in a way that redefined the nature of cultural criticism for twentieth-century Americans. He drew his inspiration from the work of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose work he translated. In his own time, Nietzsche was a profound critic of religion and democracy, public morality, and middlebrow culture. According to Marion Rodgers, the philosopher provided him with a “framework for concepts he had been formulating from an early age” and brought him to the idea that it was “the iconoclastic spirit that led to progress and freedom.” Mencken incorporated Nietzsche’s ideas concerning the degrading moral nature of Christianity, praise of individualism, emphasis on scientific inquiry and Social Darwinism into his own libertarian interpretation of American culture and democracy.

95 Rodgers, Mencken: The American Iconoclast, 105.
Although Mencken was considered “the most powerful influence on this whole generation of educated people,” it was his esteem for liberty and his contempt for democracy and moralism that justify his significance to libertarianism. In *Man Versus The Men* (1909), a collection of his correspondence with European socialist Robert Rives La Monte, Mencken issued a defense of individualism that remained consistent throughout his career. He objected to Socialism on the same grounds that he objected to Christianity: “it starts out with a command that no human being, so long as he remains a human being, can possibly obey.” According to Mencken, all attempts to achieve equality among men, socialism included, overlooked “certain ineradicable characteristics of the human animal, and certain immutable laws of the biological process.” He attributed human progress to the will to power, writing that, “every comfort that we have to-day was devised by some man who yearned to get more out of life than the man about him.” Inequality, which owed its existence in large part to the “immutable law” of survival of the fittest, was a natural occurrence. But more than that, Mencken argued, inequality was a desirable condition that identified the weak from the strong; and in doing so, helped improve the evolutionary quality of the human race. Furthermore, natural

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99 Ibid., 68.
inequality offered the “first-caste man” who was part of the “civilized minority” as an alternative to the mob rule of “low-caste men”.

Against the cultural backdrop of the Roaring Twenties, Mencken assailed the vulgar manners and puritanical morals of rural Middle Americans and Southerners, whom he generally referred to as the “booboisie”. In particular, he ridiculed the Puritanism of low-caste men, which he defined as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”100 The term encompassed everything Mencken believed to be wrong with American culture in the modern age of normalcy. His list of regular offenders included Prohibition, Holy Rollers, progressive reform movements, religious fundamentalism, Comstock Laws, vice squads and literary sentimentalism.

Mencken’s repudiation of Puritanism in American culture was directly related to his views on democracy as a system of governance. Indeed, they were “facets of the same gem. For both get their primal essence out of the interior man’s fear and hatred of his betters.”101 Puritanism and democracy were at odds with the “common decency” of the “civilized minority.” In particular, Puritanism compelled conformity among democrats with “its appeal to individual conscience, its exclusive concern with the elect, its strong flavor of self-accusing.”102

Showing no restraint in his elitist contempt for the common man and the herd mentality of the masses he continued,

The mob man, functioning as citizen, gets a feeling that he is really important to the world - that he is genuinely running things. Out of his maudlin herding after rogues and mountebanks there comes to him a sense of vast and mysterious power—which is what makes archbishops, police sergeants, the grand goblins of the Ku Klux and other such magnificoes happy. And out of it there comes, too, a conviction that he is somehow wise, that his views are taken seriously by his betters - which is what makes United States Senators, fortune tellers and Young Intellectuals happy. Finally, there comes out of it a glowing consciousness of a high duty triumphantly done which is what makes hangmen and husbands happy.¹⁰³

Ultimately, Mencken believed that placing power in the hands of the uneducated and facile majority threatened “the two greatest intellectual possessions of modern man – the idea of freedom and the idea of the limitation of government.”¹⁰⁴

Mencken accepted a position reviewing books for The Smart Set (1908-1923) in May 1911. As a literary critic, he was responsible for introducing American readers to Joseph Conrad, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, his co-editor at the Smart Set, founded a new magazine dedicated to, “a realistic presentation of the whole gaudy, gorgeous American scene.” They named it The American Mercury. In the first issue, published in January 1924, Mencken promised “the normal, educated well-disposed, unfrenzied, enlightened citizen of the middle minority” to “tell the truth…entirely devoid of messianic passion.”¹⁰⁵ The magazine offered the “outcasts of democracy” an intellectual sanctuary from the cultural chaos of the

¹⁰³ Mencken, Notes on Democracy, 218-219.
Ku Klux Klan, the Anti-Saloon League, William Jennings Bryan, lodge-joiners, Methodists, “normalcy,” Socialists, Capitalists, Greenwich Villagers, Babbitts, Snopeses, Southern Crackers, Holy Rollers, Prohibition and Puritanism. Cultural radicals, Lost Generation writers, and various other dissenters, intellectuals and social outcasts, were immediately drawn to the magazine’s “life-is-a-circus type of cynicism” where “everything is rotten, people are fools; let’s all get quietly drunk and laugh at them.” Although Mencken enjoyed a national reputation before 1924, the Mercury introduced the American public to his unfettered social criticism.

Between 1925 and 1933 Mencken had complete and total editorial control over The American Mercury. Under his direction, the Mercury evolved into a general interest magazine that reflected Mencken’s interests, prejudices and literary tastes. Mencken encouraged contributors to deal with the brutal realities of American life, without naïve optimism, romance or puritanical moral underpinnings that characterized the “genteel tradition.” He introduced readers to early work from Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O’Neill, James Joyce and William Faulkner. Although he published fictional pieces, the strength of the magazine lay in non-fiction essays from writers including Clarence Darrow, Charles Beard, Franz Boas, Melvin Herskovits, Upton Sinclair, Carl Van Vechten, Joseph Wood Krutch and Benjamin de Casseres.

Mencken liked controversial subjects and race in America was one of his favorite topics. His personal views on race are a complicated matter, owing

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106 Cowley, Exile’s return, 35.
much to his having been born white and raised in Baltimore. As a youth, Mencken frequently came into contact with African Americans, but early on adopted the Southern view of the darker races. Writings before World War I reveal Mencken's belief in white supremacy, describing African Americans as low-caste and therefore “not fitted for the higher forms of mental effort.” During World War I, the U.S. government censored Mencken for his editorial attacks on the war effort. This experience with imposed silence inspired his empathy with the oppression of African Americans because like them, he too had “suffered at the hands of the Anglo-American establishment.” During the 1920s, Mencken demonstrated a greater “racial (if not linguistic) sensitivity” indicated as much by his heightened interest in race as his support for black American literature and African American writers.

Mencken presented readers of the *American Mercury* with the twin issues of American race and race relations from all possible perspectives. He accepted contributions from anthropologists, sociologists, intellectuals, scientists and white southerners as well as African Americans. He published essays on a variety of racial topics, including black politics, religion, art, folklore, the black press, music, racial traits, racial purity, and racial relationships. Between 1924

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110 Scruggs, *The Sage in Harlem: H.L. Mencken and the Black Writers of the 1920s*. Scruggs also argued that Mencken influenced the Harlem Renaissance by encouraging black artists to express black experiences through literary realism in the form of the novel.
and 1933, Mencken published 54 articles and devoted 15 editorials by black writers or about black life – more than any other editor of his time.

Mencken was particularly receptive to work written by African Americans, and he published more articles by black writers than any other white editor of his time. According to Mencken, black writers possessed “the privileged view” of black American life, which was an important aspect of the larger American cultural landscape.\textsuperscript{112} While he was editor, the \textit{American Mercury} accepted work from James Weldon Johnson, Eugene Gordon, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes and Walter White, among many others. His honest editorial support and fair treatment of black writers earned him credibility in the eyes of the black intelligentsia. Mencken did not sentimentalize blacks and urged them to use realism and satire to express themselves and their situation.

Both Schuyler and historian Charles Scruggs have argued that Mencken was “an important factor in the development of African Americans as a writing group.” According to Schuyler, the appearance of black authors in \textit{The American Mercury} “improved the respect of thinking people for the Negro.”

For black writers, appearing in \textit{The American Mercury} was regarded as something, and if a Negro was good enough to appear in \textit{The American Mercury}, then there must be other Negroes who could write as well or better, and so they did. So many Negroes wrote for \textit{The American Mercury}, and later on came \textit{Harpers} and the \textit{Atlantic Monthly} and others like that.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
Black readers such as Richard Wright embraced Mencken for his scathing attacks on the South, the most famous of which was an essay from the *New York Evening Mail* entitled the “Sahara of the Bozart.” Others, including Schuyler and Theophilus Lewis, became familiar with Mencken from his book reviews in *The Smart Set* and continued to follow his work in the *Mercury*.

Among the black authors whose work Mencken published, none received more praise and editorial acceptance than George Schuyler. Mencken first became familiar with Schuyler through his work in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. He praised Schuyler as a man of intelligence, independence and courage, lauding the journalist’s fearless attacks on the “Negro Babbitt, who now begins to roar precisely like a white Rotarian.” In December 1927 Mencken published Schuyler’s “Our White Folks” as the lead article.

Schuyler’s satirical essay, written at Mencken’s request for an “article showing how the whites look to an intelligent Negro,” largely reflected his worldview from the *Courier*. Arguing that blacks have more intimate knowledge of whites than whites do of blacks, Schuyler concluded that the “Negro is a sort

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114 H.L Mencken, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” *New York Evening Mail*, November 13, 1917. Mencken attacked the poverty of Southern values in “The Sahara of the Bozart.” The article described the devolution of Southern culture after the Civil War. Mencken believed that the Civil War had obliterated the Southern Anglo-Saxon aristocracy who supplied the region with much of its culture. The remaining Anglo-Saxon gentry preferred to breed with their slaves rather than Celtic immigrants. Mixed-race mulattos who carried the bloodline of the old-south were natural superiors to the “poor white trash” who currently ruled the cultural wasteland. “The Negroes of the South,” he argued, “are making faster progress, culturally, than the masses of whites.” Black readers, including James Weldon Johnson, embraced Mencken’s vision of black superiority, but worried that accepting his argument wholesale was a tacit acceptance of the superiority of Anglo-Saxon slaveholders.


of black Gulliver chained by white Lilliputians, a prisoner in a jail of color prejudice.” The “intelligent Aframerican” knows that discrimination based on race is both unscientific and so, “nonsensical that he cannot help classifying the bulk of Nordics with the inmates of an insane asylum.” White supremacy and black inferiority were myths. Through adversity and discrimination, blacks had developed superior intelligence, retained the pioneering spirit, energy and originality lacked by their white counterparts. The evolutionary gap between blacks and whites was particularly evident in the backwardness of the white American South, which had “retarded its own progress” by maintaining segregated facilities, racial purity laws and Jim Crow. Such policies erroneously ignored that the diverse population of blacks is as American as their white counterparts because they share a common culture. For the “dark brother,” America was a “white and black civilization.” After 300 years on American soil, “he wants no more than an equal break with everybody else, but he feels he has much greater contribution to make to our national life than he has so far been allowed to make.”

The black community lauded Schuyler’s fearless, frank and irreverent dismissal of white pretension in the face of a predominantly white audience. The Courier held a testimonial dinner in his honor, and at least eight black

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118 Ibid., 388.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid., 392.
news_apers reviewed “Our White Folks” across the country.\(^1\) Calling Schuyler one of “the most brilliant writers of his generation,” black newspapers urged their audiences to read his “masterpiece of sarcasm and Negro psychology.”\(^2\) Other articles called readers’ attention to the fact that “the editor of that magazine has given Mr. Schuyler’s article the very front page.”\(^3\) One writer declared that Schuyler had “out-Menckened Mencken,” giving black readers “a refreshing twist and turn that breaks the pall of an otherwise tragic monotony.”\(^4\) The overwhelmingly positive reception of Schuyler’s article also indicated to at least one observer that Schuyler was “the gentleman whose sun is now beginning to climb over the horizon of our literary contributions.”\(^5\)

While his writing style was undoubtedly more urbane, Schuyler’s articles for Mencken’s *Mercury* in the early 1930s tended to be consistent with his positions on race, segregation, black nationalism, and the failings of black leadership printed in “Views and Reviews” for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. He reiterated that,

> The Negro will remain in this country. Emigration to Africa has been tried and talked about, but as a solution it can be dismissed. The Aframerican is first and foremost an American...He has nothing in common with the African blacks save his color, and the recent war demonstrated


\(3\) “Read The American Mercury for December.”

\(4\) “Out-Menckening Mencken.”

\(5\) “A New Kind of Writer.”
conclusively that the cement of similar skin pigment is not strong enough to cause groups to bury their other differences.  

Schuyler, a self-avowed atheist, amplified his attacks on black religious organizations. In “Black America Begins to Doubt,” he argued that the influence of the black church had gone into decline due to corruption, inefficiency, and a growing irrelevance in the daily lives of modern African Americans. Schuyler believed that the Church’s principal “function seems to be to keep the Negroes docile under the excessive exploitation of their white Christian ministers.” He described religious leaders as greedy demagogues who professed, “no more religion than Stalin and were in the church mainly to milk it.” Citing instances of adultery, fraud and larceny, Schuyler contended that members of the black clergy were hypocrites who preached Christian morality to their congregations but could not demonstrate it in their personal actions. In his view, the waning moral leadership of the clergy, combined with the rising popularity of secular organizations had replaced the Church as an institution for racial advancement.

During the early 1930s, most of Schuyler’s correspondence with Mencken discussed ideas for articles or editorial revisions to work he submitted for the Mercury. Mencken often criticized Schuyler for moralism in his writing, and urged the author to rely on satire to make his points. In 1932 he cautioned that, “it

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128 Ibid., 428.
129 Schuyler, “Black America Begins to Doubt.”
seems to me you spoil a good story by showing too much indignation…thus the
general effect of the article is considerably diminished, and I find myself
hesitating to take it.” “In such writing,” Mencken continued, “it seems to me that
the really effective weapon is irony. The moment you begin to show indignation
you weaken your whole case.” Schuyler also brought Mencken’s prescribed
“politics of civility” to bear on his public debates with black and white intellectuals,
even those he disagreed with. Although he may have mercilessly mocked and
criticized prominent black leaders in his columns, essays and articles, Schuyler’s
direct personal and professional exchanges with other intellectuals reveal him as
a respectful and polite thinker who was willing to engage opposing ideas in
serious intellectual debate.

Schuyler’s essays often dealt with Mencken’s favorite topics from a black
perspective. He submitted articles that appraised segregation in recreational
activities (“Keeping the Negro in his Place”), the future of American race relations
(“A Negro Looks Ahead”), a survey of Southern travel accommodations
(“Traveling Jim Crow”), black army regiments (“Black Warriors”), the beliefs and
practices of black animism (“Black Art”), transient black labor in the urban North
(“Memoirs of a Pearl Diver”), and government corruption in Liberia (“Uncle Sam’s

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130 H.L Mencken, Letters of H.L. Mencken, ed. Guy Jean Forgue (Boston: Northeastern University
131 George Schuyler, “Letter to W.E.B. Du Bois,” Personal Correspondence, January 27, 1932,
George S. Schuyler Papers; George S. Schuyler, “Letter to P.L. Prattis,” Professional
Correspondence, June 25, 1940, George S. Schuyler Papers; George Schuyler, “Letter to Ann
Shane of the American Workers Party,” Professional Correspondence, September 29, 1934,
George S. Schuyler Papers.
Black Step-Child”). Schuyler’s essays for Mencken’s *Mercury* were regularly announced, reviewed, and reprinted in black newspapers across the country. However, unlike “Our White Folks,” his later articles were not met with unequivocal praise. As Schuyler grew critical of New Deal liberalism and the Communist Party during the 1930s, his work was often met with more controversy than acclaim in the black press.

**The Depression and The First New Deal**

With the onset of the Great Depression, Schuyler widened his focus on domestic racial and political issues to include international events. Although he had been aware of international race conditions during the 1920s, it had not been a defining element in his analysis of African American conditions. A trip to Africa in 1931 combined with the worldwide economic depression and spread of Fascism and Nazi Socialism in Europe heightened Schuyler’s consideration of international events for American race relations. As Schuyler’s interpretive framework adopted a more international focus, his libertarian opposition to the American Communist Left and New Deal liberalism became more pronounced.

The Great Depression stands as one of the worst crises in American and world history. The economic growth and prosperity America experienced during the 1920s seemed to have turned into mass poverty and unemployment overnight. Historians have shown that the Depression was the culmination of long-term economic and political developments on both the national and international stage. Industrialization, labor displacement, overproduction of commodities, the rise of purchases made on credit or installment buying, inequalities in income and the distribution of wealth, U.S. foreign lending practices and tariff policies, as well as a weak global economy after World War I all played a role in the economic collapse.\(^{133}\)

For African Americans, the Depression began long before the stock market crash of 1929; they suffered disproportionately as unemployment and poverty enveloped the nation. Skilled and unskilled black laborers competed with increased numbers of desperate whites for fewer jobs. Labor displacement by whites was widespread, especially in the agrarian South. The mechanization of farming techniques and an unstable plantation economy led to lower wages and higher unemployment for African Americans in the South during the twenties.\(^{134}\)

As the economic crisis grew worse in the 1930s, “some towns passed municipal

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ordinances restricting black employment. But in most cases, intimidation and appeals to racial loyalty were most effective in securing jobs for whites.\textsuperscript{135}

In the North, conditions were not much better. Although many were able to find manufacturing work in the period between World War I and the Great Depression, the black population quickly outgrew the industrial labor supply. Discrimination by employers and in industrial labor unions was common, giving Northern blacks little job protection or security. As the Depression grew worse, unions forced the non-union blacks out of their jobs. In the face of high unemployment and increased job competition, the best blacks could hope for was relief from the government.

President Herbert Hoover’s initial response emphasizing volunteerism and limited federal intervention largely failed to curtail the effects of the 1929 stock market crash. Driven by a misguided belief that the degree of suffering was still manageable, the administration opposed providing additional federal relief funds until it was too late. Most American voters blamed Hoover for the Depression. Desperate for new leadership, they called for electoral change. Black voters in particular found themselves alienated by Hoover’s policies. Many abandoned the Republican Party to support Franklin Roosevelt, the Democratic Party candidate from New York. As a result, Hoover lost the 1932 presidential election to FDR.

Roosevelt endorsed the use of government as a tool to provide economic security and improve the lives of its citizens. His inclusive rhetoric and “fireside chats” allowed citizens, and especially blacks, to feel as though their needs were

\textsuperscript{135} Sullivan, \textit{Days of Hope}, 23.
being considered and cared for. Upon taking office, FDR immediately began instituting a wide-ranging program of financial reforms and relief programs to aid the ordinary American who had been hit the hardest by the Depression. Although historians have shown that the early New Deal was conservative by comparison to later New Deal initiatives, Roosevelt nonetheless instituted financial and legislative reforms to provide relief through government subsidized agriculture and employment. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) to raise farm prices by limiting agricultural production for the benefit of large Southern farm interests; the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to develop public utilities and provide unemployment relief; and the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) that created the National Recovery Administration (NRA) to regulate the economy through industrial codes that governed wages, working conditions, and labor practices, were all legislative cornerstones of the early New Deal.\footnote{McElvaine, \textit{The Great Depression}, 148-162; Sullivan, \textit{Days of Hope}, 42-45.}

Schuyler was skeptical of FDR and the reforms initiated under the first New Deal. He believed that the NRA was a failure, and later remarked that it had “no effect whatever on the Negro for the better.”\footnote{George S. Schuyler, “The Reminiscences of George S. Schuyler, 1962,” interview by William T. Ingersoll, n.d., 252.} Likewise, the AAA existed for the benefit of wealthy landowners; it did little to improve the conditions of the average worker, black or white. The AAA reduced crop acreage, but the sharecropper received no part of the government funds that compensated the farm owner for reducing his acreage. As a result, the unemployed sharecropper...
was forced off the land and out of his home. With no jobs available in either agriculture or industry, Schuyler observed that if “the AAA continues, perhaps a million of these workers will be forgotten men.” The plan of the “Roosevelt Regime” to “help these landless, homeless, usually foodless farm workers by placing them on small farms of their own” sounded like a good idea, but only in theory. However, Schuyler claimed, “it is merely a reformist plan that fails to attack the problem at its roots.”138 Instead, it poured money into southern agriculture without confronting the systemic ills of the plantation system. The unwillingness of FDR to challenge the Southern wing of the Democratic Party led Schuyler to become disillusioned by the administration’s failure to acknowledge and address racism within the New Deal.

In 1931, Schuyler traveled to Liberia at the request of publisher George Putnam Pullman to investigate allegations of slavery brought by the League of Nations against the Liberian government. Founded for former slaves in 1822, Liberia had been the victim of mismanagement and exploitation. European nations had exploited Liberia’s natural resources, while greedy politicians had left the nation in crippling debt. Above all, Christian missionaries had inflicted the most damage. He denounced them saying, “these disciples of the lord are a callous, muddleheaded, incompetent lot; patronizing, pitying and despising the natives.” They had indoctrinated Liberians to reject their native culture and “to

glorify everything white.” As a result, the country was plagued by corruption, violence, poverty and a crumbling infrastructure.\textsuperscript{139}

Schuyler discovered the rumors of Liberian slavery to be true, and after an eight-month voyage returned home with his report. He published his findings in a six article series that ran in \textit{The New York Evening Post}, \textit{Buffalo Express}, \textit{Philadelphia Public Ledger} and the \textit{Washington Post}. The \textit{Evening Post} carried a two-page spread of his photographs depicting life among native Liberian tribes. The \textit{Pittsburgh Courier} ran an eight week serial of Schuyler’s account of slavery in Liberia. In 1932 he published \textit{Slaves Today}, a fictional account based on his newspaper articles of the slave conditions he observed in the Liberian state.\textsuperscript{140}

Upon returning from Liberia, Schuyler turned his attention to the American South. In 1932, he traveled to Mississippi on behalf of the NAACP to investigate the exploitation of black workers on a levee construction project in Mississippi. More importantly, he became increasingly concerned with the trial of nine black boys taking place in Scottsboro, Alabama.

During the early Depression years, the American wing of the Communist Party (CPUSA) had slowly been gaining support among poor black workers throughout the South. The CPUSA believed that southern blacks constituted an oppressed nation and advocated a program of “Self-Determination in the Black Belt.” This could only be realized by establishing a separate black republic or a “49th State” comprised of the Southern states where blacks constitute a majority

\textsuperscript{139} Schuyler, “Uncle Sam’s Black Step Child.”
of the population. The Party orchestrated multilayered grassroots campaigns throughout the region, and became a “working class alternative to the NAACP.” They organized black laborers, advocated for interracial unions, published newspapers, engaged in judicial activism by taking up the legal defense for Angelo Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys, and addressed important social and political issues within the black community such as lynching, police brutality against African Americans and miscarriages of justice. However, black support for CPUSA among the masses was not so much ideological as it was practical. For the most part, followers embraced the Communists’ vocal and militant activism for black equality more so than they aligned with Party doctrine.

In March 1931, nine young black men aged thirteen to nineteen were removed from a freight train in Alabama and arrested after a fight with a group of whites. They were taken to Scottsboro and later charged with the rape of two white women. The nine boys were tried, found guilty and sentenced to death within two weeks. The Communist affiliated International Labor Defense (ILD)


142 Herndon, a Communist activist, was arrested for attempting to incite insurrection and overthrow the state government while leading a biracial demonstration protesting unemployment in Atlanta, Georgia. The ILD contracted the defense to Benjamin Davis Jr. and John H. Geer, who used the trial as an opportunity to challenge the constitutionality of Georgia’s insurrection law and the legitimacy of the state’s use of all-white juries. In 1933, Herndon was convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to twenty years on the chain gang. Communists used Herndon’s case to convince civil rights activists to support and align with CPUSA activist efforts. Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 20-21; Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 97.

took an early interest in defending the Scottsboro Boys whereas the N.A.A.C.P. was reluctant to intervene. Following public pressure from other branches, independent organizations in the black community and famed activists such as Clarence Darrow, the N.A.A.C.P. decided to act. The simultaneous involvement of both organizations resulted in a bitter battle for control of the legal defense.

In its pursuit of complete control over the defense, the ILD gained the trust of the boys’ families. It depicted the N.A.A.C.P. as insensitive to the defendants and held rallies attacking the organization. ILD and Communist supporters disrupted N.A.A.C.P. meetings, and attacked the organization in the *Daily Worker*, a Communist newspaper. N.A.A.C.P. officials were outraged by the attacks. Despite attempts to gain the Scottsboro Boy’s allegiance, the organization was forced to withdraw from the case in January 1932.

Schuyler covered the trial as a journalist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. His affiliation in the NAACP led Schuyler to defend the organization and its efforts. Schuyler believed that the CPUSA had expropriated control over the Scottsboro legal defense from the NAACP and exploited the ignorant sympathies of poor Southern blacks for financial gain. In an article for the *American Spectator*, he announced that, “The Scottsboro Boys have been Jonahed…the boys have been afflicted with Samuel Leibowitz and chained to the Communist chariot. If they do not suffer the fate of Sacco and Vanzetti, they will probably rot in prison like Mooney, a tragic memorial to megalomania, Negrophobia and propaganda.”

144 George Schuyler, “Sam Leibowitz: Jonah in Modern Dress,” *The American Spectator*, August 1934. Many critics of have equated Communism with the Jews and as a result, explicitly
The article provoked harsh responses from the Left. Journalists denounced Schuyler as an Uncle Tom and a race traitor, and the *New Masses* labeled him a professional prostitute “willing to hire out to the top powers.” The ILD’s vicious campaign confirmed Schuyler’s fear that Communists would latch on to a racial issue to advance their own agenda without regard for the safety and future progress of the African American community.

In the 1920s, George Schuyler had made it clear that he didn’t agree with Communists’ efforts to “capture of Negro labor for the revolution by boring from within.” Although he appreciated the Communists’ abilities to organize black workers, he believed that their platform for violent overthrow of government was too radical for African Americans. Schuyler did not perceive the Communists as a serious threat or influence on African Americans, and his tone was typically more of ridicule than serious hatred. During the 1920s and into the early 1930s, he dismissed them as “old hokum” in his columns for the *Messenger* and the *Courier*. However, during and after the Scottsboro Trials, hate-filled repudiations of Communism and the Communist Party dominated Schuyler’s articles, columns and editorials. Following the trials he wrote, “It became

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abundantly clear [to me] that I must devote all of my energies to fighting this conspiracy to destroy the Negro population to ensure a Communist victory.”

Using the same logic as he had for rejecting Garvey, Schuyler disavowed the ILD and the CPUSA’s “Self-Determination in the Black Belt” as a solution for racial tension in America. He denounced the Communists as fanatical, fraudulent, dishonest and hypocritical agitators. Controlled by the COMINTERN in Russia, American Communists had “glibly mouthed the lie that ‘Negroes have never been so aroused before by any organization, forgetting the past century of the Negro’s history in a surge of mob emotionalism.’” Rejecting their efforts as ineffective and “completely alien to the realities of the American scene,” Schuyler accused Communists of being the “worst kind of race chauvanists” and exploiting the misery of impoverished black labors with utopian visions of racial separatism:

The tactics of the Garveyites and black Communists have been identical, consisting mainly of wild, lying attacks on every Negro who wears a clean shirt and has the respect and confidence of his fellow Negroes...The leaders of this maniacal Red group have lamentably failed to organize any black workers in the North and they avoid organizing the Southern Negro farm and industrial workers.

Leaders within the organization did not escape Schuyler’s wrath. They were “worse than the black politicians who make a living hanging on the fringes of the Republican and Democratic parties. They do whatever is ordered whether

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148 Schuyler, Black and Conservative, 191.
beneficial or not to the Negro masses just so long as they get their salaries.”\textsuperscript{151}

Unfortunately for African Americans, “what the Soviet constitution says doesn’t amount to a square inch of Scot Tissue.” Communist Russia was not the Socialist utopia Communists claimed it to be when advocating a similar revolution on American soil.

Absence of color prejudice is merely academic when there is only one political party and advocacy of any other is treason; when there is only one press, and that owned by the government and expressing but one point of view; when freedom of movement is restricted in accordance with the whims of autocratic officials; freedom of speech is a ‘petite bourgeois prejudice’\textsuperscript{152}

Communists, he argued, were no better than Nazis or Fascists – all thrived on forced labor and forced obedience. Perhaps, Schuyler suggested, in comparison to the repressive totalitarian regimes that existed under Stalin and Hitler, African Americans might not have it so bad. In 1939 he declared in \textit{The American Mercury} that by and large “Negroes Reject Communism,” although he continued to criticize black leaders who supported or sympathized with Communist views for the remainder of his career.\textsuperscript{153}

By 1937, Schuyler’s libertarian notions of liberty and individualism were at the forefront of his attacks on Communism and suggested his support for American capitalism. In an article for the \textit{Amsterdam News} he stated that, “to be sure, it is wise for colored people under present circumstances to have economic

\textsuperscript{152}George Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” \textit{Pittsburgh Courier}, September 9, 1936.
organizations and associations, but they should enter business like other people seeking general patronage." Furthermore, he argued that the “isolation of colored people would be the inevitable consequence of the development of aggregation, group economy, voluntary segregation or whatever you want to call it. This could only mislead and disillusion the colored people and retard the development of an American nation.”

These comments indicate that Schuyler’s repudiation of racial separatism and his defense of individual liberty had converged, moving closer towards extreme individualism. Clearly, the days of advocating for unionization and consumer co-operatives had passed. After World War II, he carried this line of argument a step further, declaring at the Congress for Congressional Freedom that the United States offered unlimited potential for African American individuals to succeed under capitalism.

Schuyler, long before Hannah Arendt would do the same thing, grouped Fascism, Communism and Nazi Socialism under the general category of totalitarian ideologies. In “Views and Reviews” he remarked that,

I have been saying all along that there is no fundamental difference between Fascism and Communism...Masters of duplicity, the various Communists throughout the world have expediently thrown overboard principle they once espoused just like the Nazis and the Fascists ditched their ‘revolutionary’ work among the blacks serfs, sold oil to Italy to help defeat Ethiopia, staged the ‘Black and White’ film fiasco, all in an effort to make up to the Western imperialist powers – England, France, etc. – to

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little avail.  

In 1939, he joined the Committee for Cultural Freedom. Schuyler, along with 96 other scholars and artists, united to condemn all forms of totalitarian government. Led by John Dewey, the organization also admonished those who opposed Fascism and Nazism, but not Communism, as anti-democratic ideologies. Sidney Hook, Max Eastman, Henry Hazlitt, John Chamberlain, and Eugene Lyons were among those who lent their support.

Schuyler’s rejection of Leftist ideologies extended to the Second New Deal and eventually, liberalism altogether. During the First New Deal, Schuyler’s critique centered on the racial inequity in government relief programs as well as FDR’s refusal to confront American race relations for fear of upsetting Southern Democrats. In Schuyler’s opinion, FDR had promised African Americans greater equality under his administration but done nothing to combat institutional racism. As Schuyler lamented when discussing racial discrimination in the newly created alphabet agencies, “I am sure that no one can show where the jim crow pattern was abandoned or any steps taken to eliminate racial segregation.” He frequently cited discrimination in the NRA (or “Negroes Robbed Again”), WPA, TVA and federal housing projects as evidence of this deception. For Schuyler, the First New Deal symbolized FDR’s failure to make good on his campaign promises to the black community.

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By the dawn of the Second New Deal, and the spread of totalitarianism in Europe, Schuyler evolved into an outspoken critic of New Deal liberalism. This was as much the result of his dislike of FDR as it was his growing disillusionment with liberal solutions to the problems of the Great Depression. This shift is particularly evident in the correspondence between Schuyler and Mencken, which had broadened from dialogues about Schuyler’s work to larger discussions of current events. They exchanged views on the sorry state of the American South, FDR, and communists, among others.\textsuperscript{157}

After being censored and blacklisted by the federal government during World War I, Mencken became hypersensitive to the government’s use of power to regulate culture and interfere in the lives of its citizens. On the same principle that Mencken opposed Prohibition, religious fundamentalism, vice squads, censorship, Comstock laws, and Puritanism in American culture, he also objected to the New Deal. Mencken refused to acknowledge the severity of the Great Depression. He was skeptical to the point of paranoia. In his view, FDR was a loathsome demagogue whose emphasis on the economic suffering of the masses was a ploy to consolidate state power in the federal government. Mencken often referred to him as “The Fuhrer,” and denounced the New Deal as

little more than a planned economy.\textsuperscript{158} Mencken shared his libertarian views of the New Deal with Schuyler, who expressed them in his own critique of the New Deal and defense of anti-communism.

During the Second New Deal, Schuyler’s objections to New Deal liberalism extended to the centralization of the national economy and the expansion of the federal government. As early as 1933, he had warned Courier readers that the New Deal was a dangerous move toward state capitalism that was destined for failure.\textsuperscript{159} Government expansion also embodied the threat of totalitarianism. In an issue of “Views and Reviews,” he expressed his perspective in a series of leading rhetorical questions,

One hears many persons refer to the New Deal as “progressive” and “liberal,” but what is progressive and liberal about immense extension of the federal power at the expense of the individual and community? Is it progressive to have a vast army of people on the government payroll with economic and social activities snooped into and hamstrung by a swarm of officials? Is it progressive or liberal in this manner to impose a vast burden of taxation to pay the bureaucratic army and spend billions on projects of dubious worth? Are the AAA and the OPA and the other totalitarian institutions in Washington necessarily progressive? True, they represent change but is it improvement? If so, in what ways? Why are people who advocate totalitarian controls and more centralized government dubbed liberals and progressives while those who oppose them are dubbed reactionaries?\textsuperscript{160}

In a letter to his wife written in 1935, Schuyler reiterated his anti-statist sentiment. Reacting to John Chamberlain’s review of Albert Jay Nock’s anti-

statist, libertarian tract *Our Enemy, The State* he wrote, “those are my views also. But I am philosophic about it all.” Like Nock, Schuyler had grown convinced that there was no salvation for the masses. “I find one must not expect too much from the human race,” he lamented. “I once did but I have seen the light and shall sin no more.”

According to Schuyler in his autobiography, Nock’s ideas had influenced him even before reading *Our Enemy, The State*. During the 1920s, he read *The Freeman*, a “weekly individualist magazine” edited by Nock. Schuyler and Suzanne LaFollette, Nock’s former assistant and managing editor of *The Freeman*, became close colleagues. When Suzanne LaFollette revived *The Freeman* as a magazine for “traditional liberalism and individual freedom” in the 1950s, Schuyler regularly contributed his black libertarian voice to its pages.

As Roosevelt began to support the Allied powers and prepare the nation for American engagement in the European conflict in the early 1940s, Schuyler considered his support for another world war. Initially, he believed that the “European war would [will] free the colored world” by crippling the political stature and economic resources of white civilization. But as U.S. entry into the war loomed on the horizon at the end of 1939 he, like Mencken, came to favor an

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isolationist position for fear that the war effort would lead to censorship and a restriction of civil liberties.\textsuperscript{165}

Himself a veteran of the U.S. Army, Schuyler also recognized the hypocrisy in fighting for freedom and democracy abroad while African American citizens were not afforded the same treatment at home. The racism he experienced in the armed services informed his views, and he urged African Americans not to support the war effort or join the military as long as segregation and Jim Crow continued to exist in America. In “Views and Reviews,” he wrote, “the white man is at least encouraged to believe that this is his country, the land of unlimited opportunity. The Negro, on the other hand, is informed in season and out that despite his 300-year residence he is still an alien.” He added, “it is an ironical, a cruel jest that they should even be ASKED to fight to preserve a system that ridicules, demeans and degrades them.”\textsuperscript{166} Although Schuyler was an isolationist who opposed both American and African American participation in the war effort, he was supportive of the Pittsburgh Courier’s aggressive “Double V” campaign that called for “victory at home and victory abroad.” He believed that the campaign would inspire the federal government to integrate the military and offer equal treatment of blacks in defense industries.

Even as he opposed totalitarianism on principle, he nonetheless believed that race relations would worsen and the black community would suffer the most if the U.S. became involved in the conflict. “The U.S.A. will be the world source of

\textsuperscript{165} “Schuyler Raps War Mongers at N.Y. Meet,” The Chicago Defender, April 12, 1941.
\textsuperscript{166} George Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” Pittsburgh Courier, December 2, 1939.
Negrophobia,” he wrote, and “the best blacks and their multi-colored brethren can hope for is a more benevolent white man’s burden in which Negroes will enjoy more sweetness and light and less flogging and exploitation but will have to forego the boon of social, political and economic equality.” The war would only intensify the segregation, racial enmity and discrimination that stripped blacks of their citizenship rights.167

War support among African Americans, particularly that of the black leadership, infuriated Schuyler. When A. Philip Randolph and William Pickens supported the war effort by signing pamphlets for the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies that encouraged African Americans to support U.S. aid to Great Britain, Schuyler responded in “Views and Reviews”. “They speak of the Hitler menace to freedom of speech, press and assemblage, forgetting all about Georgia, Louisiana and Alabama.” He pointed out the hypocrisy in black leaders’ support for the British, who not long before had acted as imperialists in Kenya and Rhodesia. This contradiction was only made worse by Randolph’s justification that “if Britain loses, democracy and liberty will lose” and that “such defeat will threaten our American system of democracy and liberty.” Comparing British imperial policy with Hitler’s pseudoscientific racialism, he concluded in his unique twist of Menckenian logic that, “these are all admirable gentlemen but I think they are misguided as between the British and German butchers there is nothing to choose. Our alleged leaders should stop kidding us.”168 To Schuyler,

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168 George Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 12, 1940.
the choice was between the lesser of two evils – America’s British Allies and her German Enemy – and either way, African Americans stood to lose from an armed conflict.

Although a government investigation in 1942 tempered the vitriol in Schuyler’s anti-war rhetoric, he nonetheless continued to criticize black leaders until the end of the war. This explains why in 1943 his focus changed from black leaders’ support of the war to their general failure to advocate a pragmatic program that ranked basic economic survival over social and political equality. “The bankruptcy of Negro leadership is appalling,” he declared in 1943, “it has no sound program to prevent race relations from worsening and its strident ululations have slight effect on the speedy trend towards bi-racialism.” According to Schuyler, opportunities for black advancement would decline in a segregated post-war world. It fell on black intellectuals and leaders to craft ways for the black community to take advantage of these conditions. However, Schuyler believed that they had abandoned this task in favor of social protest movements like A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement (MOWM). “Negroes in positions of leadership have spent most of their time echoing the obvious in the best traditions of demagoguery. This successfully ‘rouses the savage’ but does not advance the group one iota. Indeed, it may worsen their state because it stirs demands which cannot be satisfied without intelligent analysis, sound leadership and wise action.” However, these three traits were lacking among the current group of black leaders, leading Schuyler to conclude that, “we woefully
need planning and analysis at the top. We need administrative ability. We need more realism and less gullibility.”

Schuyler carried his assessment of the black leadership’s lack of pragmatism, economic planning, and strategic foresight into his analysis of the Civil Rights Movement as it developed during the 1950s and 1960s.

Between the beginning of the 1930s and the end of World War II, Schuyler came into his own as a libertarian conservative. Like his fellow libertarian H.L. Mencken, Schuyler denounced the New Deal as an overextension of state power and an imposition on individual liberty. Schuyler’s friendship with Suzanne Lafollette and Albert Jay Nock’s individualist ideas also proved important influences. In his autobiography, Schuyler wrote that Nock’s magazine The Freeman “more nearly expressed my conservative views than any publication of the time.”

In the immediate post-World War II period and early Cold War, Schuyler became involved in the growing conservative intellectual movement. Schuyler continued moving further to the political Right throughout the 1950s, but the nature of his conservatism remained constant. He was a dedicated anti-communist and libertarian. During the Cold War, his views were characterized by his defense of individualism, embrace of the free market as the solution to racism and racial inequality, and a fear of totalitarianism that manifested in paranoid right-wing anti-communism. By the end of the 1960s, Schuyler had moved into the far-right fringe of the American political scene.

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During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Schuyler became actively involved with the growing conservative intellectual movement, lending his support to the right-wing anti-communist movement led by Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-WI). He sympathized with former leftists and New Deal critics who perceived the threat of communism looming on the horizon. To these intellectuals, America and its values lived under the impending threat of aggressive totalitarianism coming from the Soviet Union. This was an absolute moral battle, and Americans must mobilize a united front to protect their freedom and way of life by destroying the Russian communists before they reached domestic shores. Compromise and neutrality were impossible in the face of communism. Schuyler identified with the vigorous conservative opposition to communist forces, arguing that “the primary struggle today is between collectivism and individualism as represented by the USSR and the USA that this is a battle to the death, that it is an either-or proposition where all middle ground has disappeared.”¹⁷¹ Throughout the 1950s and 60s, he came to the defense not only American capitalism but also domestic race relations.¹⁷²

Although he did not share the religious fervor and Christian beliefs of many conservative intellectuals, Schuyler aligned with their conception of communism as the “god that failed.” Like Whittaker Chambers, Schuyler

interpreted the cold war in Manichean terms of good versus evil and agreed that
the choice between communism and democracy was a moral one. But for
Schuyler, this morality was secular in nature. He did not define evil in relation to
Christian doctrine but instead shared H.L. Mencken and Ayn Rand’s libertarian
system of values that defined evil as anything that, “denigrated man’s rationality,
total self-reliance and freedom.” Christianity and God were secondary issues
when liberty and democracy were threatened. Unlike Rand who was ousted
from the conservative movement by Whittaker Chambers and William F. Buckley
for her attack on Christianity, Schuyler did not declare war on Christianity even
though he favored an objectivist approach in his own work. Buckley even
published his work in National Review throughout the late 1950s and early
1960s. Schuyler had spent his career attacking religious organizations and
leaders in the black community on the grounds that they misinformed blacks to
trick them out of their hard earned wages. However, he tolerated religious beliefs
among white intellectuals in the conservative movement because he believed the
war against communism required a united front.

Anti-Communism on the Cultural Front

During the early Cold War, Schuyler contributed to anti-communist and
conservative publications including The American Mercury and The Freeman,
which by that time had developed into important outlets for conservative

173 Ibid., 238.
intellectuals. The Mercury had become increasingly conservative following Mencken’s departure in 1933. Under the guidance of Mencken’s successor, the anti-communist libertarian Harry Hazlitt, the magazine had expanded its scope to include foreign affairs. Hazlitt resigned after only a few months and Mencken’s former assistant Charles Angoff took over, moving the magazine’s editorial policies further to the political left. This displeased many readers, particularly Mencken. When Paul Palmer assumed control in 1936, he successfully molded the Mercury into “a worthy journal of conservative opinion.”\(^{174}\) Lawrence Spivak, the founder of Meet the Press, purchased the magazine in 1939 and named Eugene Lyons as editor. Like Sidney Hook, Lyons was another important anti-communist from the Left. Under Lyons’ editorship and Spivak’s management, the Mercury became a leader in the attack on Stalin and in exposing Communist "penetration" in the United States.

Several of the Mercury’s conservative contributors and editors were also associated with The Freeman. Founded by Albert J. Nock in the twenties, the magazine declined during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1950, it merged with Plain Talk to create an anti-communist journal dedicated to defending individualism and the free market economy. Schuyler had been involved with Plain Talk during its short run in the late 1940s. He wrote several pieces for the monthly, and was appointed managing editor (along with Mercury editor Eugene Lyons and former Freeman editor Suzanne Lafollette) of the magazine in 1947.\(^ {175}\) In the late 1940s

\(^{174}\) Singleton, H.L. Mencken and the American Mercury Adventure, 240.

and early 1950s, *The Freeman* and *The American Mercury* provided a crucial source of leadership and structure for the “developing libertarian wing of the conservative movement.”¹⁷⁶ Schuyler’s work for the *Mercury* and the *Freeman* provides insight into his libertarian approach to American race relations after World War II.

During the 1930s and early 1940s Schuyler had conceded that capitalism offered opportunities for black advancement and was therefore preferable to the repressive Communist alternative. But he remained critical of the economic discrimination and second-class citizenship African Americans had experienced under capitalism.¹⁷⁷ In the early 1950s, as Schuyler’s libertarianism became more pronounced, he demonstrated an unabashed embrace of the free market as a necessary condition of liberty and progress. In a 1950 essay for *The Freeman*, he offered a spirited defense of the abilities of capitalism to “emancipate the workers from servitude” and “liberate the artists and intellectuals”, concluding that, “the alternative to free enterprise is slave enterprise.”¹⁷⁸ While his views were undoubtedly anti-communist, his libertarian attitude towards capitalism had grown uncritical.

In 1950, Schuyler joined the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (ACCF), an anti-communist coalition of artists and intellectuals that operated as an independent affiliate of the international Congress for Cultural Freedom

Secretly funded by the CIA, the CCF was an international, anti-Communist organization made up of European and American intellectuals, writers and artists. Its members were former Leftists and fellow travelers from around the world who had abandoned Marxism and Communism in the wake of Stalin’s atrocities. The ACCF had a much stronger and more rigid anti-communist flavor than the CCF, which was more liberal due to its European connections. It billed itself as “a worldwide, non-partisan organization of thinkers, writers, scientists, and artists. Its purpose is the defence of intellectual liberties against all encroachments on the creative and critical spirit of man.” Its manifesto, signed by prominent former leftists such as John Dewey, Sidney Hook, and Daniel Bell, stated that “we hold that indifference or neutrality in the face of such a challenge amounts to a betrayal of mankind and leads to the abdication of the free mind.”

Sponsored by the United States High Commission in Germany, the CCF convened in Berlin in 1950 to define its anti-Communist platform and establish a permanent organization. Melvin Lasky, editor of Der Monat, the German magazine, invited Schuyler to attend the conference in Berlin as a delegate. Also in attendance was James Burnham, another prominent member of the growing conservative intellectual movement.

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Schuyler delivered a speech, entitled “The Negro Question without Propaganda,” that signified his arrival in American conservative activism. He glorified the African American experience under capitalism, focusing on the virtues of a free enterprise system. His speech emphasized how American capitalism afforded African American individuals with growing opportunities for prosperity, equality and success. Schuyler repudiated any suggestion to the contrary as a “vicious propaganda campaign of lies and distortions to which ungrateful totalitarian states have subjected the United States of America.”\textsuperscript{181} It was later republished in shortened form in \textit{The Freeman} and \textit{Reader’s Digest}.

Schuyler continued his involvement with the ACCF following the Berlin conference. However, he began to feel that there were too many anti-Stalinist Socialists on the executive committee that included Sidney Hook, Daniel Bell, S.M. Levitas, David Riesman, and Peter Vierick. Schuyler did not think that the group was anti-communist enough. Schuyler, who had defended McCarthy in his \textit{Courier} columns, characterized him as a well-intentioned politician who was appalled by what he learned of the wide ramifications of the Communist conspiracy against America and wanted to do something about it, despite the frightened opposition of everybody from the White House down.\textsuperscript{182}

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\textsuperscript{181} George S. Schuyler, \textit{Rac(E)ing to the Right: Selected Essays of George S. Schuyler}, ed. Jeffrey Leak (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 60.  
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Following the board’s attempt to oust Burnham and its attacks on McCarthy in *McCarthy and the Communists*, Schuyler resigned his membership in October 1954.

Schuyler’s views through the 1950s were his unique libertarian response to the Cold War. His faith in individualism had turned him against totalizing and authoritarian ideologies, which he broadly identified as a monolithic Communism. During the Cold War, heightened tensions between the USSR and USA amplified what Schuyler perceived as a threat to his way of life. The social upheaval in the black community caused by the bourgeoing Civil Rights Movement, particularly the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* that integrated public schools and the Montgomery Bus Boycotts in 1955, encouraged Schuyler to become even more dogmatic in his views.

Schuyler’s conservatism informed his critique of the Civil Rights Movement, which he referred to in his autobiography as the “so-called Negro Revolution.” In an article for *The American Mercury*, he argued that the goal was “not to be white, but to be free in a white world.” In his view, this (still) meant equal economic opportunity for African Americans to succeed in the free market. Schuyler constantly emphasized the fact that race relations had been steadily improving since World War I. In *The Freeman* he remarked that, “Americans should be proud that their free system has been capable of such

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183 Ibid., 341.
However much he praised the American system, he nonetheless conceded in the *Courier* that there was more progress to be made.

This advancement would have to be economic in nature. The critic denounced civil rights leaders and non-violent demonstrators as communist inspired agitators who sought to destroy American democracy rather than achieve racial equality. He had equal condemnation for the black power movement. In particular, Schuyler objected to their calls for “race consciousness” which valued group racial autonomy over cultural pluralism.

In his columns and editorials, he deemed popular black leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X dangerous to African Americans for their emphasis on mass demonstrations. He wrote that,

> The goal of the overwhelming majority of American Negroes is middle-class co-existence. Millions have attained this status, and more are doing so all the time. There is lessening economic discrimination and everywhere they wish to vote, they are doing so. It will not speed the process to continue tactics of harassment and annoyance, but may well cause a retrogression in race relations to the disadvantage of all.\(^{186}\)

Schuyler clung to the beliefs he had held since the 1930s, that the most pressing issues in the black community were economic in nature, and that individual initiative could produce more political change than collective protest. Schuyler rejected calls for civil rights legislation as a solution to American racism. He criticized the Civil Rights Act of 1964 because he believed it would increase

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\(^{186}\) George Schuyler, “Dr. King: Nonviolence Always Ends Violently,” in *Rac(e)ing to the Right* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 131.
white resentment rather than foster racial equality. Schuyler also resisted the involvement of government in matters of individual and moral conscience. Instead, he argued that social and political equality between the races could only be achieved through free enterprise in conjunction with gradual, voluntary changes in the hearts and minds of the people.

In 1964, a year many historians believe a crucial one for American conservatism, Schuyler ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Congress on the Conservative Party ticket against Adam Clayton Powell.\textsuperscript{187} That year he also campaigned for Barry Goldwater and joined the John Birch Society, an organization that screamed right-wing extremism. The message of the organization combined anti-statist notions of small government with paranoid conspiracy theories of communist infiltration in all facets of American life. The Communist infiltration reached the highest levels of government, including, miraculously enough, President Dwight Eisenhower. Led by Robert Welch, Birchers also believed that Communists instigated the Civil Rights Movement and accused Martin Luther King, Jr. of having ties to the international Communist movement.\textsuperscript{188}

In 1964, William F. Buckley, Jr. ousted extremists from the mainstream conservative movement. This included the Birchers as well as hard-core

\textsuperscript{187} 1964 marks the cohesion of ideas within the conservative intellectual movement and the climax of conservatism’s “burst into prominence” on the American political scene with Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign. See Perlstein, \textit{Before the Storm}; Nash, \textit{The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945}; Lichtman, \textit{White Protestant Nation}.

individualists such as Ayn Rand. George Schuyler, who believed mainstream conservatives were not anti-communist enough and whose ideas represented the values of both groups, was expelled as well. Nonetheless, Schuyler campaigned for Goldwater and threw the candidate his support in his weekly *Courier* columns. He defended Goldwater’s ideas about small government, the free market, and civil rights.

Schuyler shared Goldwater’s belief that the government should not have passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He viewed the Act as an attempt by the government to legislate morality and overextend its authority. Furthermore, Schuyler agreed with the Birchers’ views on Communism in the Civil Rights Movement. His attacks on the actions and leadership of the Civil Rights Movement seemed outlandish to most African Americans. Having alienated and offended the majority of his readers with extremist views, the *Courier* dismissed Schuyler from the paper in 1966. Meanwhile, Schuyler had also grown too extreme for many conservatives. He published exclusively in right-wing publications, such as the William Loeb’s *Manchester Union Leader* and the John Birch Society’s *American Opinion* and *Review of the News*, until his death in 1977.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In its obituary for Schuyler, the National Review remarked, “he showed the distinctive courage of a man cast in one ideological mold who broke loose from it, recognizing in America the abundance of opportunities which he himself took in advancing his professional career.”189 Schuyler, a self-made man, valued the sovereignty of the individual throughout his career. Although his early collectivist strategies may seem to contradict his underlying faith in individualism, they are reconciled by Schuyler’s sympathy and concern for the survival and success of the common man. He identified with the economic struggles of the black working class, and tried to offer practical, realistic advice that would enable them to find success. For Schuyler, this meant protecting the individual’s right to intelligently decide his/her own future. If that meant that an individual chose to unite with others under a common cause, so be it. At bottom, he was only trying to do for others what he had done for himself.

The value of self-help was instilled in him at a young age, and shaped his rejection of collectivism, his hatred for Communism, his critique of New Deal liberalism and the welfare state, and his embrace of the free market as the best solution for America’s race problems. Even when the majority disagreed, he refused to waver from what he believed to be right. In this sense, he embodied H.L Mencken’s notion of the modern artist-iconoclast; a critic liberated from the prevailing cultural norms but in constant conflict with the inherently stupid mass

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of “Babbitts” who dominated the American landscape. However by the end of his life, Schuyler’s iconoclastic libertarian values had hardened into extreme skepticism and far-right conservatism.

Schuyler’s importance to American intellectual history is two-fold. He is both an African American conservative and a conservative African American. His move from the political Left to the political Right is notable among twentieth century American intellectuals who traveled the road from Marxism to conservatism, because it occurred within the confines of a liberal movement dedicated to collective racial equality. He believed that a viable black resistance movement against racism required strong black individuals. For over forty years, Schuyler stood out among Left and liberal African American intellectuals as a conservative voice. In contrast to W.E.B. Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, and Martin Luther King, Jr., who all believed that equality could be achieved through collective action, social protest, and government legislation, Schuyler defended his individualist economic strategy.

Schuyler was no less unique among white conservative intellectuals. Unlike Sidney Hook or Irving Kristol, who abandoned the Left after witnessing the atrocities of World War II, Schuyler realized that Marxism was bankrupt during the Great Depression and never looked back. In the years that followed, he was the lone African American libertarian in a conservative movement dominated by white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants who by and large believed that blacks were inferior by nature. Historian Allan Lichtman convincingly demonstrated how
conservatives couched their racism in the rhetoric of states’ rights. Editorials in the *National Review* denounced the *Brown* decision and condemned Southern civil rights activists for disturbing the peace and challenging white superiority. An editorial from 1957 defended restrictions placed on black voting rights by the “white community”, because “for the time being, it is the advanced race.” Lichtman also offers persuasive evidence to show that William F. Buckley, Jr.. privately expressed a belief in black inferiority. Lichtman cites a 1961 correspondence where Buckley wrote that, “I pray every day the Negro will not be given the vote in South Carolina tomorrow. The day after, he would lose that repose through which, slowly but one hopes surely, some of the decent instincts of the white man go to work, fuse with his own myths and habits of mind, and make him a better and better instructed man.”

Schuyler liked nothing better than to be the example that proved this view wrong.

One can also locate Schuyler’s legacy among contemporary black conservatives such as Clarence Thomas, Thomas Sowell, and Shelby Steele. Their arguments for individual self-help in the face of the federal government’s affirmative action and welfare programs recall Schuyler’s biting critiques of New Deal liberalism during the 1930s. There are also traces of Schuyler’s influence within the African American ranks of the conservative Tea Party Movement. They too have been called race traitors and Uncle Toms for their defense of what Lenny McAllister described as, “limited government, low taxes, individual liberty

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191 Williams, *George S. Schuyler*, x-xi.
and free enterprise.” Former ACORN and union organizer Kevin Jackson, an African American Tea Partier joined the movement because he believed that, “the Left under Obama sought [seeking] to destroy the freedoms that we as Americans have fought so hard to have, and the Left's determination to socialize, to take over the state.”

This could just as easily have been George Schuyler’s explanation for joining the John Birch Society in 1964. Beyond providing an intellectual foundation for African Americans to embrace the conservative ideas of the far right, Schuyler made their membership in extreme conservative organizations plausible.

Following in a long tradition of black and white American social critics, Schuyler used his powerful words and pithy criticisms to attack the obstacles impeding individual success in American society. George Schuyler’s significance can be appreciated as both an iconoclast who defied the conventions of African American activism, and a maverick who broke through the racial boundaries of American conservatism.

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