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Jonathan Rosenberg: How Far the Promised Land?

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Introduction

COLOR-CONSCIOUS INTERNATIONALISM AND THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY STRUGGLE

> The nightmare is over. The world awakes. The long, horrible years of dreadful night are passed. Behold the sun! We have dreamed! . . . And now suddenly we awake! It is done. We are sane. We are alive.

WITH THE END of the First World War, this hymn to peace appeared in the pages of the December 1918 issue of *The Crisis*, the monthly organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. That same month, just three weeks after the armistice was signed, the author of those hopeful lines, W.E.B. Du Bois, was on his way to France, where statesmen would gather to forge the postwar order. Representing the NAACP, America's leading race reformer would remain in Europe for more than three months on a mission possessed of both domestic and international implications. Du Bois, who was involved in a variety of efforts to ameliorate the plight of peoples of color at home and abroad, would write later that he had gone to Paris in the belief that "the destinies of mankind" were centered there.[1]

As he crossed the Atlantic on the *Orizaba*, Du Bois shared a cabin with Lester Walton, a leading black journalist, and Robert R. Moton, who had succeeded Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute. The vessel carried the press corps that would cover the peace conference and according to philanthropist George Foster Peabody, who was also on board, it was fortunate Du Bois and Moton were traveling together, for this would allow them to "map out . . . a program" and advance the "single-minded-cooperation of the colored people in this great crisis period . . . when the future of the colored races is of so great moment."[2] Guided by three objectives on his foreign mission, Du Bois would gather material for a proposed history of black Americans in the Great War, act as the special representative of *The Crisis*, and represent the NAACP in an effort to aid the cause of black peoples throughout the world. He would play a key role at the Pan-African Congress, which would meet in Paris and seek, in part, to influence the diplomatic discussions over the disposition of the former German colonies in Africa, an issue world leaders would address in the French capital. This was no assignment for the faint of heart. But Du Bois was blessed with supreme confidence in his ability to transform world affairs, and he reached Paris believing in the transcendent importance of his mission. In this respect, he was not unlike another American who would soon arrive in France: the president of the United States.[3]

Indeed, just days before both men left for Europe, Du Bois penned an illuminating letter to Woodrow Wilson, which suggests the importance race leaders attached to the peace conference. Identifying an interconnection between developments in Paris and in the United States, Du Bois noted that race reform leaders would not hesitate to link international and domestic matters to advance their reform aims. He claimed the American race question was "intimately related to the import of the international conferences" and wrote of potential American vulnerability at Paris to charges of racial discrimination in the United States, which might lead to an "indictment of inconsistency." The reformer noted that America, which denied democratic privileges to "more than twelve million souls," was seeking to provide leadership at a conference that aimed to democratize states that had long withheld equal rights from their inhabitants. If the United States continued to deny some of its own citizens these rights, it would be "a libel on our civilization." Asserting that blacks had "earned as much consideration as most of the smaller nations whose liberties and rights" were to be safeguarded by the international agreement, Du Bois told Wilson that America "owes to the world the solution of her race problem," which should be resolved "by the same impartial and righteous judgement that is to be applied to other peoples." While the president did not respond to Du Bois's letter, it testifies to the race leader's conviction that the peace conference was supremely important in the context of the domestic struggle for racial justice. And it suggests the extent to which he believed the international gathering could help the campaign at home.[4]

Du Bois's European journey and his views on the significance of the peace conference point to the focus of this study, which explores the interconnection between world affairs and the most important reform movement in twentieth-century American history, the African-American freedom struggle. More specifically, the work is an inquiry into why American race reform leaders found world affairs so engaging and how they incorporated their understanding of a variety of international developments into their domestic reform campaign. It is equally important to understand the way the reformers perceived American actions on the international stage from World War I to the Vietnam War, and the manner in which they responded to the country's emerging preeminence in world politics. In examining the reformers' response to international developments and American actions overseas, I consider a variety of narratives that are typically presented in different books written by different historians, and I explore the interplay between the black freedom struggle, international affairs, and America's changing role in the world.[5]

Among the reform leaders who figure prominently in the work are W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Joel Spingarn, Mary White Ovington, William Pickens, Walter White, Mary McLeod Bethune, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Ralph Bunche, and Martin Luther King, Jr. A cosmopolitan group of men and women, black and white, these were central figures in the struggle for racial justice, who toiled to end discrimination in education, voting, housing, transportation, and employment. If some occasionally subscribed to a radical perspective, by and large, these individuals were not seeking the fundamental transformation of the American political and economic order. Although such leaders were working, in a real sense, to achieve radical change, they were mainly traditional figures in the history of modern American race reform and represented the movement's mainstream.

In addition to considering the views of reform leaders, I focus closely on the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which played a crucial role in the unfolding campaign for racial justice. Indeed, much of the study traces how the association and its leadership responded to global developments and American actions in world politics throughout the twentieth century.[6] While I examine the NAACP, I also consider the worldviews of figures in other civil rights organizations, including the National Urban League, the National Negro Congress, the March on Washington Movement, and later, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Although my focus is largely on top-level reformers and the organizations in which they served, I am mindful of the trend away from "top-down" studies of the movement in favor of more grass-roots approaches. To be sure, such work continues to enrich our understanding of the struggle, but I would suggest that during much of the twentieth century, a considerable amount of the movement's energy and direction came from above. From World War I through the mid-1950s, top leaders and organizations like the NAACP played a critical role in the reform effort by generating support among black Americans and by persuading the American people their cause was just. And of course, such leaders spearheaded the attack on Jim Crow in the judicial and legislative spheres. Moreover, to the extent that world affairs informed the struggle, such matters were likely more significant to national rather than local figures, who were more concerned with the day-to-day challenges of sustaining the reform enterprise, often in small and inhospitable environments.[7]

Perhaps it is surprising that the men and women I have chosen to study—those devoted to building a more just society in the United

States—would have found the world beyond America so engaging. Surely, such leaders were occupied with the daunting challenges of the reform enterprise, with publicizing the inequities of race relations in America and convincing their fellow citizens to abolish institutionalized racial oppression. One might imagine that scrutinizing, reflecting, speaking, and writing on events overseas would have weakened the reformers' efforts to effect change in the United States. But they did precisely this, and over many decades, the movement's leaders demonstrated an extraordinary interest in global affairs and made their understanding of the world central to the message they presented to their followers, the nation, and the international community. In speeches, articles, columns, editorials, lectures, petitions, conferences, essays, books, letters, and travel accounts, the race reformers focused intently on overseas affairs and America's place in the world, and they made such matters a key part of their crusade. They did so to energize their supporters and to clarify, legitimize, and strengthen the aims of their struggle to policymakers and the American people. The reformers were convinced, in short, that developments abroad could provide traction for the cause.

This keen interest in the world points to an important theme I shall develop in this study, namely, that numerous mainstream race reform leaders were internationalists, who shared some of the ideas and values embraced by American internationalists throughout the twentieth century. One historian has written that the internationalists were nearly all old-stock Protestants descended from English forebears, but I would suggest that the race reformers' worldview was not dissimilar from that of this traditional group, although the race leaders' understanding of the world was very much their own.[8]

Scholars have found it difficult to agree on the precise meaning of the term *internationalism*, and have established a variety of taxonomies in order to elucidate the concept. Still, a belief in the practicability of cooperation (economic, social, or cultural) among the world's peoples and a belief in the possibility of constructing a more pacific world order that could render war less likely or even obsolete have been among the core ideas embraced by nearly all internationalists. Moreover, most internationalists have believed that some type of international organization, for example, the League of Nations or the United Nations, was needed to help create and sustain global comity. Another tenet of the internationalist creed has suggested that the United States has a special mission in the world, the achievement of which would enable humanity to construct a more cooperative global order.[9] In important respects, the race reform leaders subscribed to such ideas and supported the development of organizations like the League and the United Nations, believing transnational cooperation and the abolition of war were desirable and attainable goals.

And surprisingly, many race reformers were persuaded that the United States had a unique role to play in the world, although as we shall see, for the reformers this was a more complicated matter.

If there were points of convergence between the race reformers' understanding of the world and that of the traditional internationalists, there were also significant areas of difference. The race reformers' worldview, which I have chosen to call color-conscious internationalism, combined the familiar with the novel and represented a bold departure from traditional internationalist thought. One objective of this study is to delineate the course of color-conscious internationalism, for to understand the history of the civil rights campaign, it is necessary to consider how the movement's leading figures viewed twentieth-century global affairs and America's changing role in the world.

Color-conscious internationalism comprised three key characteristics. First was the conviction that transnational institutions such as the League of Nations and the United Nations had a critical role to play not just in world politics but also in the domestic realm. In the international sphere, such institutions would be instrumental in helping to dismantle imperial rule in the developing world and, by contributing to the cause of self-determination, would foster a more just global order. In the domestic sphere, the reformers believed the League and the United Nations could help abolish institutionalized racial oppression in two ways: first, by compelling the United States to apply the provisions of the League or United Nations charters to American domestic society; and second, by serving as useful arenas in which race reform leaders could marshal world public opinion against America's discriminatory racial practices. The race reformers were hopeful that such organizations could contribute to the reconfiguration of race relations in the United States, which would help to create a more just society.[10]

A second aspect of color-conscious internationalism concerned the notion that America—despite its domestic shortcomings—had a critical role to play in helping to shape world politics, the ultimate outcome of which would be a global order that was less oppressive and more democratic. But for the United States to assume the mantle of world leadership and to help humanity reach this exalted plane, the race reformers insisted that America had to reform its domestic social relations, race relations, especially. To become the world's reformer, the United States had first to democratize its domestic social and political institutions—to harmonize them with its self-proclaimed global aspirations—for it was not possible, to use the famous phrase, "to make the world safe for democracy" as long as America itself was not genuinely democratic. The race reformers thus identified a tension between America's willingness to assume a world leadership role, a posture many supported, and the persistence of domestic racial oppression. This tension would inform the way many civil rights leaders viewed the activities of the United States on the international stage throughout the twentieth century.

A third component of color-conscious internationalism flowed from the idea, embraced by most traditional internationalists, that it was desirable to work toward cooperation among peoples and that such cooperation could transcend national boundaries. Sondra Herman has written of the internationalist impulse to help increase "the sense of human unity," while Warren Kuehl writes of the internationalists' desire to "heighten an awareness" of such unity.[11] This belief in the possibility of worldwide cooperation and transnational unity lay at the very heart of color-conscious internationalism, though for the race reformers the notion was not quite so expansive. The unity in which the race reformers believed was the unity of the downtrodden. Oppressed peoples of color throughout the world—whether in Africa, Asia, or the United States—were bound together by the reality of their subordinate status, interconnected by a shared lack of autonomy. For race reform leaders, the domestic campaign was inseparable from the worldwide struggle against racial oppression, and it was in this way that the internationalist belief in the unity of humanity and in transnational cooperation achieved meaning. Throughout the twentieth century, civil rights leaders identified themselves as part of a global reform project, and as part of this "imagined community" of reformers they wedded their domestic aims to the aspirations of those working to liberate peoples of color around the world.[12] For the men and women animated by the idea of color-conscious internationalism, freedom was indivisible.

I have suggested that color-conscious internationalism powerfully informed how American race reformers viewed the world and that throughout the twentieth century they placed their understanding of international affairs at the center of their reform message. In exploring that message, this study rests on sources derived from the public record the movement produced, a record typically encountered by large numbers of people in a variety of settings. Not surprisingly, as the reformers presented their message to different audiences, their aims varied considerably. An NAACP official speaking before the United States Congress had objectives different from a reformer addressing the NAACP's annual conference, for example. Likewise, the objectives of Du Bois, writing in the black press, differed from those that drove Walter White when he was speaking to a national radio audience. The work considers the importance of such distinctions as the reformers articulated their message in myriad settings: in addresses at annual conferences; in sermons, books, pamphlets, and essays; and in the columns and editorials published in newspapers, journals, and magazines.[13] Private correspondence is included, particularly when it illuminates the reformers' perceptions of foreign developments.

One of the key sources is the NAACP's monthly publication, *The Crisis*. The association's journal, which Du Bois established in 1910, serves as a superb lens through which to view a broad range of issues related to race reform in America. From the outset, Du Bois believed the monthly would be essential for the movement's success, asserting that his creation, in its words, pictures, manner, and "conception of life," would be crucial for training reformers and potential reformers.[14] As a source for understanding the unfolding struggle for justice, *The Crisis* is unsurpassed. And in establishing an unambiguous connection between overseas developments and domestic reform, it consistently articulated the reformers' distinctive brand of internationalism, which it conveyed to hundreds of thousands of devoted readers throughout the twentieth century.

The work is divided into eight chapters and includes a prelude and a postlude. Following the prelude, which briefly considers the significance of World War I for the race reform campaign, the first two chapters examine the war and its immediate aftermath, a period in which the American president had repeatedly told his fellow citizens that they were involved in a conflict that would enable humanity to establish a more just and democratic world, an effort America was uniquely suited to lead. Listening closely to Woodrow Wilson, the race reformers appropriated and reconfigured his language, infusing their message for change with Wilsonian rhetoric, in an effort to get the country to grant to black Americans the freedom—the self-determination—the president told his people they were fighting for overseas. The notion that the war and race reform were inextricably connected pervaded the discourse of reform in the black press, magazines, speeches, and sermons. Reform leaders transformed the president's rhetoric on the superiority of democratic institutions, the oppression of ethnic minorities, and the necessity for a League of Nations—language Wilson had used to rally the nation in war—and deployed such ideas to rally the black population at home and to legitimize their program for change. If the president could use the grammar of right and justice to convince the country it was worth dying for democracy overseas, the activists asserted, it was right and just to create a genuine democracy in the United States.

During the interwar years, the focus of chapters 3 and 4, the outside world continued to attract the reformers' gaze. The international disarmament impulse was of particular interest during the 1920s, as were developments in the Soviet Union, which some reformers saw as an emerging egalitarian society and even a possible model for reconfiguring American race relations. The reformers were also fascinated by Gandhi's activities and tactics in India, a reflection of their growing interest in the stirrings against empire in the developing world. During the 1930s, the reformers were intently interested in European fascism and were energized by developments in Ethiopia, which Italy invaded in 1935, and moved by the civil war in Spain. The emergence of Nazism provides an especially compelling story in this period, as the reformers consistently linked the horrific developments in Hitler's Germany to life in the Jim Crow South. They hoped such an analogy would clarify the character of American race prejudice and thus legitimize the reform movement in the minds of their fellow citizens.[15]

Chapter 5 considers World War II, a watershed in the struggle for racial justice, after which it would become impossible to shunt the civil rights debate to one side of the national agenda. The race activists persistently equated the global battle against tyranny with their domestic struggle against racial oppression, and the fact that ideas about race were supremely important in the European and Pacific theaters made it easy to use the conflict to serve the domestic cause.[16] As the race reformers argued throughout the war, because America had assumed a leading role in sweeping German and Japanese racialism from the world stage, it was imperative to sweep Jim Crow from the domestic scene.[17] The war defined the contours of the movement in these years, and the reformers used it effectively to help their cause by setting the opportunities and dangers inherent in the world crisis before their supporters, policymakers, and the American people. This approach would yield tangible gains, and these achievements, which the reformers believed were milestones in their struggle, are attributable in part to the reformers' deft use of the war as a lever with which to effect change.

If World War II powerfully influenced the movement, the postwar years presented the reformers with distinctive challenges and opportunities. With victory in 1945, there was a sense that race relations had reached a new juncture, and reform leaders continued to seize upon world affairs as they had for many years, placing the momentous events of the postwar era at the center of their quest. Chapter 6 examines the period from 1945 to 1950, when, in the wake of the war, the movement assumed an increasingly global character. Civil rights leaders determinedly equated their domestic struggle with the freedom campaigns that peoples of color were waging in Asia and Africa, recognizing little distinction between the aspirations of colonial peoples and those of black Americans. In addition, the reformers manifested a keen interest in the activities of the United Nations, believing the institution had a role to play in helping the oppressed in the developing world and in abolishing domestic racial oppression. The emerging East-West antagonism would also become a key concern for the reformers, given the questions it raised about what many saw as a struggle between democracy and tyranny.

Throughout the 1950s, as I trace in chapter 7, the Cold War and decolonization remained the key international considerations of the race reformers, and they made both of these epochal developments central to their message. As was common in these years, many mainstream reformers viewed the Cold War as a struggle between two ways of life and believed the conflict could help them persuade their fellow citizens to construct a genuine democracy in the United States. If by the late 1940s the American government had taken the lead in working to quash the perceived global threat of Soviet Communism, the reformers pointed time and again to the inconsistency between fighting tyranny abroad and tolerating segregation at home. Mainstream reformers did not doubt that America had a leadership role to play in the world. But to do so effectively, they asserted, the country had to get its own house in order. At the same time, the liberation campaigns waged by peoples of color were of particular moment to reform leaders, who pointed to the parallels between their domestic exertions and the efforts of the oppressed throughout the world. Significantly, the reformers wedded North-South to East-West concerns, arguing repeatedly that the United States needed to end domestic racial persecution if it wished to command the loyalty of peoples of color in the developing world, a goal they claimed was vital during the Cold War.

The final chapter briefly considers the movement during the 1960s and suggests the divisive effect the Vietnam War wrought on the civil rights campaign. Many, but not all, reformers came to argue that American brutality overseas was merely an extension of American brutality at home, a perspective that tested severely the tenets of color-conscious internationalism. United States policies in southeast Asia, which opened fissures throughout American society, proved no less problematic for those seeking justice for African Americans. The book concludes with a short postlude that ponders the relationship between world affairs and the domestic freedom struggle.

During the fifty years examined in this work, the ebb and flow of America's international engagement informed how civil rights leaders sought to use foreign affairs to serve their cause. When the United States was at war, the reformers worked to translate American belligerency into concrete achievements such as the democratization of military service, officer training, and defense industry employment. But when the United States was not an active belligerent overseas, the reformers deployed international developments in a more purely rhetorical fashion—to fortify, clarify, and legitimize their message. This approach is especially important for understanding how the movement's leaders responded to events after 1945, as the United States energetically pursued its foreign policy aims throughout the world.

The way the reformers responded to overseas affairs may have been supple, but a consistent theme throughout these years concerned their conviction that it was necessary to highlight the gap that separated America's historic belief in the sanctity of democracy, freedom, and equality from the historic reality of racial oppression in the United States. Throughout this fifty-year period, the race reformers spoke forcefully about the disjunction between the nation's professed commitment to democratic ideals and the institutionalized oppression of black Americans, and they consistently invoked America's deeply rooted ideology of freedom to fortify their cause.[18] The race activists chided America for not living up to its promise, particularly at those moments when the nation entered the maelstrom of world politics and engaged in actions that American leaders inevitably characterized as efforts to defend democratic values.

The persistent tendency among presidents and policymakers to portray the United States as the international defender of democratic ideals calls forth another of the book's themes, namely, the correlation between the emergence of American globalism and progress achieved on the civil rights front. American activism in the world, particularly as it developed during and after World War II, contributed to the movement's postwar success, and the chapters that follow point to the interconnection between these two signal developments in twentieth-century American history: the quest for racial justice and the increasing global preeminence of the United States. The reformers' strategy of trying to turn overseas affairs to their advantage became most powerful when the United States began to play a leading role in world politics, especially after 1940. For then, American policymakers began to recognize that Jim Crow was expensive and that the cost would be drawn on America's international account. And later, as the United States became more deeply engaged overseas, the reformers' argument that domestic racial oppression exposed the country to grave risks in a perilous world became a trenchant rhetorical device, and the strategy of incorporating international matters into the civil rights campaign became considerably more effective than it had been earlier. At a time when national insecurity was becoming the order of the day, the reformers asserted repeatedly that the nation's failure to create a genuine democracy at home would diminish America's global influence and endanger its well-being. In using the East-West conflict to prod the nation into building a more just society, the movement's leaders conjoined the language of reform with the concerns of the emerging national security state.

Something of a hybrid, the book does not fit easily into any obvious field or subfield. Part of the ongoing effort to enrich our understanding of the history of the United States in the world, the project has been informed by the work of scholars interested in reconceptualizing United

States international history, especially by those drawn to what has come to be called the cultural approach to that field. One of the pioneers of this approach to international history, Akira Iriye, has written that there is "no definition of culture that is completely satisfactory to students of international affairs." This point suggests a related observation, namely, that there is no definition of the cultural approach to United States international history that is completely satisfactory either. According to Iriye, one characteristic of the approach is that it considers world affairs "in terms of dreams, aspirations, and other manifestations of human consciousness."[19] With this in mind, I have sought to examine how a group of committed reformers perceived and interpreted global developments and incorporated such matters into their campaign in an effort to help realize their dreams and aspirations at home. The aim of the book, then, unlike that of other important works on civil rights and world affairs, is to explore the distinctive internationalism that was central to the crusade for racial justice in twentieth-century America.[20]

It should be noted that I do not consider how black Americans influenced foreign policy, nor is the state, the centrality of which is typically a defining characteristic of works of foreign relations history, my primary focus. The subjects under consideration, civil rights organizations and those who headed them, are nonstate actors, and though the state plays an important part in the story (the movement's leaders were responding to state actions and working to reform state-sanctioned oppression), it is not the fundamental object of inquiry.[21] Instead, I have sought to probe the perceptions and ideals of a group of American reformers and to understand, as Iriye has written, how "local forces integrate themselves into a global situation," or more pertinently, into changing global situations.[22] This local-global nexus is especially salient when one considers the extent to which civil rights leaders conceived of their movement as part of a worldwide crusade to liberate peoples of color.

While my primary objective is to illuminate the interconnection between overseas developments and domestic race reform, the book points to a broader phenomenon in American history, namely, the extent to which world affairs have interacted powerfully with domestic life. Although it has become a commonplace to observe that the United States has had a profound impact on the twentieth-century world, it is worth remembering that throughout American history, the world has had a profound impact on America. Indeed, one of the lineaments of American history is the considerable influence global developments have had on the contours of the nation's political, social, cultural, economic, and intellectual life, and this study, which stands at the point where domestic and international developments intersect, suggests, I hope, that this historical and historiographic marchland is worth exploring.[23]

A final (introductory) word concerns the historical bricks and mortar out of which this book is constructed. A distinguished scholar has noted that the work is based mainly on rhetoric, and to be sure, one of my primary aims is to examine the reformers' language as it unfolded over the course of the twentieth century. In considering reform movements, one must look closely at the way reform leaders frame their message, for this is how they seek to gain support for their agenda. Those working to advance the campaign for racial justice in America were convinced that to achieve their aims it was essential to articulate a powerful message that would catalyze support for their program and persuade the American people their cause was right. According to one reformer, it was necessary to gain public acceptance of the movement's goals and to present a message that would help change public attitudes on racial matters. This objective, he said, was "the basic public relations task" of the struggle.[24] The material out of which reformers fashion a language of persuasion—how they shape their message, what they choose to emphasize, and why—is thus integral to the reform enterprise. And such language is the means reformers use to realize tangible ends such as the passage of legislation or victory in the courtroom. Persuasive language is closely related, moreover, to the preeminent goal on the reform agenda: the transformation of beliefs and values that allows for social progress.[25]

With this in mind, it might be helpful to imagine civil rights leaders sealed off completely from any awareness of world affairs during the fifty years covered here. Such leaders would have headed a movement altogether different from the campaign that actually unfolded and framed a fundamentally different message. The race reformers would have explained the character of American race relations in different terms, sought to inspire their supporters differently, and tried to persuade the American people and policymakers that their cause was just in ways other than they did. The content of the reform journals and countless opinion pieces in the black press would have been different, as would the focus of innumerable speeches, conferences, and meetings. One cannot say how the movement would have sounded, what arguments the reformers would have made, or how they would have framed their program for domestic change. But they would, necessarily, have done so differently. The reformers' strategy of incorporating their unique understanding of the world into their message profoundly affected the tone, the trajectory, and, finally, the momentum of race reform in these years. That the movement's leaders made global developments central to their struggle makes it imperative to understand how and why they did so.