



November 2023

Lecture 04

Harlem Renaissance

I. What is Harlem Renaissance?

Harlem renaissance is an artistic movement that appeared in Harlem, New York between 1920 and 1935. African-American artists and writers used their access to arts and literature to criticise the racist system and raise awareness about racism and its impact on the lives of Black people in the USA. The movement provided Black artists with a space to create and form their own and to vocally express their identity desire for freedom and equal rights.

Names of the Movement

In different works, Harlem Renaissance can also be referred to in some sources as The New Negro Movement or Black Renaissance.

II. Historical Background

As a movement, Harlem Renaissance did not start on a set date or day, rather various reasons and different forms of struggles experienced by the African-American community resulted in its formation and contributed in structuring its main ideas.

1. South vs. North Policies

Since before the Civil War (1861-1865), the South and North of the USA held different policies when it comes to dealing with African Americans. After abolishing slavery in the southern states, it formed what is known as the Black Codes and after it the Jim Crow laws to continue its oppression and subjugation of Black Americans. Northern cities, on the other hand, provided Black Americans with some extent of freedom. Due to this, since the slavery period, African Americans considered the North as a haven that grants them the desired freedom and equal rights.

2. The 1920s Great Migration

With the rise in the cases of **lynching** of Black people and their inability to secure stable jobs in the rural South, around six million African Americans moved up to the urban North throughout the years since 1910s. The Black Migration of 1920, as it is known, in particular came around the time of WWI. During this period, the industrial economy and factories in the North opened their doors for African Americans as they were in need for working hands.

3. Racial Discrimination

New York has always been the preferred destination for African Americans—in addition to immigrants from the West Indies and Africa—for its position as a cultural, political, and economic centre. Although the North of the USA was known for its perceived freedom and as a space of equality, racism took different (i.e., subtle) forms in it. With the move of large numbers of African Americans to the city, especially around Harlem, white Americans started to move out of these areas leaving them for minorities. Through time, Harlem became the main destination for Black Americans from different parts of the USA, which turned it, in Alain Locke's words, into a 'Race Capital' for Black people (quoted in Kennedy 2000, p. 72)

🦋 Harlem as a Space: With its churches, clubs, and shops, Harlem brought large numbers of African Americans from different parts of the USA together, creating by that a collective community. Intellectuals from different social backgrounds came together and used the space created by Harlem as their base to launch their calls for equal rights, to educate their people about different forms of racism that they struggle with, and to explain what does being an African American mean in a white society. To do so, African American artists celebrated their Blackness and tended to take pride in their ties with Africa. Moreover, Harlem became a place where new forms of music emerged, like Jazz and Blues, in addition to new forms of fashion, new techniques in paintings and sculptor, and new generation of writers and poets.

III. Harlem Renaissance Literature

Through the use of realism, African-American writers were able to portray an accurate and realistic image of the Black experience instead of what some white writers and artists used to represent in their works as in the case of minstrel shows. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, African-

American writers tended to use their literary texts to narrate the social and psychological struggles of African Americans with racial discrimination. In so doing, African-American writers addressed two main points:

1. Collective Memory

In order to form an identity separate from white America, Black Americans needed to connect themselves to a history. Through their works, African-American writers went back to the origins of the Black community in the USA, that is African cultures and slavery/freedom narratives. By celebrating their African roots and embracing the struggles of the slavery period, the Black community formed a shared heritage that became the base for its identity and then freedom.

2. Psychological Struggles

By giving a realistic image of the experiences of Black Americans with racial discrimination, African-American writers turned inward to discuss the psychological traumas that racism causes for their own people. Problems like feelings of loss, inferiority, and lack of confidence are a few of the psychological topics that Harlem Renaissance literature brings to the surface and addresses directly.

IV. Main Themes

1. Double Consciousness

The term was first introduced by the African-American sociologist and writer William Edward Burghardt Du Bois in his book *The Soul of Black Folk* (2018/1903). Double consciousness, according to Du Bois, represents the state of confusion and **duality** that African Americans experience due to being both American and Black while inhabiting an anti-Blackness society. This psychological state reflects a ‘torn-ness’ (2018, p. 7) of thought that the Black subject struggles with and the conflict between an American identity (i.e., white and anti-Black) and Black identity.

2. Invisibility

Even though the Northern cities claimed that they provide equal rights for African Americans, white Americans were blinded by their prejudice and continued to treat Black Americans as inferior. By being set at the margin of the American society and continuously denied simple civil, political, and economic rights, African Americans were ignored and treated as if they do not exist as a part of the American community.

V. Main Figures

*A suggested list of the main figures of the studied period and their key texts is included in the PPT presentation of this lecture.

References

- Du Bois, W. E. B. (2018). *The souls of black folk*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1903).
- Kennedy, L. (2000). *Race and urban space in contemporary American culture* (Vol. 9). Psychology Press.