



A Forgotten Black Conservative: A Closer Look at George S. Schuyler

Over the years, The John Birch Society — the organization of which The New American is an organ — has been besmirched by its ideological rivals for all manner of evil, most prominently of which is the sin of “racism.” More specifically, given that its membership has always been and remains predominantly white, it is “white racism” with which it has been charged.

However, it is difficult to see how this charge can be made to fit once it is recognized that as far back as the 1960s, one of the most notable *black* writers in the country — George S. Schuyler — became a member of JBS. Actually, Schuyler was among the most astute, courageous, wittiest, and impassioned writers, black, white, or other.



Of course, that Schuyler was a conservative and a member of JBS is *not* recognized by many because, regrettably, Schuyler himself is no longer remembered.

Born in 1895 in Rhode Island, Schuyler spent his formative years in Syracuse, New York. He served in World War I and, upon being discharged, moved to Harlem where he spent the rest of his days until his death in 1977. Yet during this time, Schuyler enjoyed quite an eventful existence.

Throughout the decade of the 1920s, he became associated with that circle of artists that history would recall as “the Harlem Renaissance.” During this same period, interestingly enough, Schuyler also joined the Socialist Party. However, in his autobiography, [Black and Conservative](#), Schuyler admits that it was from a craving for intellectual stimulation, and not an affinity for socialism, that initially drew him to this organization. But even though it was only a relatively short while before he became disenchanted with the ideas of his associates, apparently his time as a member was not for naught, for from this juncture onward, Schuyler became an ardent enemy of all things that so much as remotely smelled of communism. To the end of combating “the red threat,” he employed his skills as a writer for such publications as H.L. Mencken’s *American Mercury* and *The Pittsburg Courier*, the largest black newspaper publication in America of which Schuyler was editor from 1922 until 1964.

The title of Schuyler’s autobiography, [Black and Conservative](#) (1966), is indeed a fitting description, for Schuyler was a conservative. That there were differences of various sorts between the races he never would have dreamt to deny. But these differences, he insisted, had nothing to do with *nature*; they were *cultural*. To put this point another way, like any good conservative, Schuyler underscored the monumental role that *tradition* plays in constituting identity. And in order to show that it was culture or tradition that accounts for *differences* between black and white Americans, he drew attention to their



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similarities — likenesses that ordinarily escape casual observers of both races.

For example, Schuyler repudiated the notion that there was something that can aptly be termed “the Harlem Renaissance” — *if* it is said to center around a distinctively black art. He wrote: “Negro art there has been, is, and will be among the numerous black nations of Africa; but to suggest the possibility of any such development among the ten million colored people in this republic is self-evident foolishness.” Slave songs, “the blues,” jazz, and “the Charleston” are alike the creations of blacks, but, as Schuyler notes, they originated with *Southern* blacks and, as such, are “foreign to Northern Negroes, West Indian Negroes, and African Negroes. In short, they are as “expressive or characteristic of the Negro race” as “the music and dancing of the Appalachian highlanders or the Dalmatian peasantry are expressive or characteristic of the Caucasian race.”

Within the context of America, so-called “Negro art” is in reality Eurocentric. As Schuyler put it, “the Aframerican [sic] is merely a lampblack [sic] Anglo-Saxon.” He was not short on substantiation for this claim.

“The dean of the Aframerican literati is W.E.B. Du Bois, a product of Harvard and German universities; the foremost Aframerican sculptor is Meta Warwick Fuller, a graduate of leading American art schools and former student of Rodin; while the most noted Aframerican painter, Henry Ossawa Tanner, is dean of painters in Paris and has been decorated by the French Government.”

That black American artists are more akin to their white counterparts than either blacks and whites tend to realize is unsurprising once we consider that “the Aframerican is subject to the same economic and social forces that mold the actions and thoughts of the white American.” For instance, “in the homes of the black and white Americans of the same cultural and economic level one finds similar furniture, literature, and conversation.” Schuyler asks: “How, then, can the black American be expected to produce art and literature dissimilar to that of the white American?”

What Schuyler believes is true of the black American artist he is convinced is no less true of black Americans generally: their dispositions, tastes, and sensibilities are the products, *not* of a uniquely “black nature,” but the Eurocentric or Anglo-Saxon cultural traditions in which they were nurtured. Conservatives, forever mindful of the tradition or culturally constituted character of individual identity, have always regarded the radically individualistic notion of the “self-made man” as a fiction: no one can literally lift himself up by his own bootstraps, for every person is dependent, often in ways of which he is unaware, upon the assistance of others. Doubtless, Schuyler is of a piece with other conservative thinkers on this score. But he goes a step beyond this to rebuke the related idea that *racial groups* can shed *the* cultural traditions within which *their* distinguishing features were formed.

From Schuyler’s discussion of racial issues, conservatives of all races can learn much about their own intellectual tradition.

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