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# THE NEGRO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AND THE CULTURAL PATTERN

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This article might be entitled "Descent from the Ivory Tower," for the writer, after years of study of the problem of educating Negroes conducted within college and university cloisters, has for the past several months been serving as the administrator of a college. This college is designed to render its major service in the training of teachers for the Negro elementary schools of the State.

With other students of the social complex that is the South, the writer has for several years been viewing, more often with alarm than otherwise, and as "objectively" as possible, precisely that social and economic pattern which it is now his duty not only to understand, interpret, and describe but also to reform. The past research has been carried on with that grave abstraction appropriate to the scholarly endeavor; the present responsibility not only calls for a frenzied attempt to answer the question "Knowledge—for What?" but also necessitates a transition from preoccupation with the pure science of society to a somewhat harried effort to make applications.

In this paper it has seemed appropriate for the author to remain in character for the two separate tasks implied by the subject: to review, first, what the social sciences have, currently, to tell us regarding the social complex that includes Negroes in the South; and, second, to describe what implications there are in these supposedly scientific facts for an educational institution which, once studied, ceases to be merely the object of research and becomes the vehicle for effecting social change.

## I

Just yesterday—Victorian and post-Victorian yesterdays—the interpretation of the “Negro problem” was either sentimental, humanitarian, and in terms of eighteenth-century equalitarianism, or it was of the order of contemporary racism. In the light of the first view, the Negro was a man and a brother; to be uplifted by educational missionaries, saved from sin by religious efforts, brought to economic equality by the twin agents of an “education” and political measures. The first efforts, in the South, to educate Negroes were carried on largely by missionary teachers from New England, equalitarians all, disciples of Calvin on the one hand and Horace Mann on the other. To a strict insistence on the severest standards of a puritanical moral code they added the faith in the common man implicit in the New England common-school revival. It was all to be very simple: spelling books, temperance lectures, the ballot; and the brother in black would emerge, no longer a chattel or a serf, but a man, a brother, a citizen.

To give all credit to the host of New England schoolmarms who followed Grant to Vicksburg and Richmond, Sherman to Atlanta, and Banks and Butler to New Orleans, the great majority of them soon realized the terrific nature of the uplift in which they were engaged, but stuck doggedly to their simple rules, in the midst of tremendous discouragements, for the rest of their active lives. To their credit be it said also that they did perform miracles. In each place, they touched both the children of disorganized ex-slaves and of free people of color, and under this almost magic touch of the schoolmarm at Hampton, at Fisk, at the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary (now Spelman College), there did emerge from chattels and serfs men and women.

Viewed in perspective, the failure of these missionary teachers to achieve the goals set was due to three difficulties. In the first place, they were spread too thinly through the South. Of a population of almost two million educables of school age at the end of the Civil

War, not to mention the equally numerous illiterate adults, the mission schools could touch but a few thousand. In the second place, the decline of war hysteria and of humanitarianism in the North meant that replacements and support were scanty. And, finally, they ran head on in the postreconstruction South into a nationwide revival of racial dogma that was to persist for a generation, unequaled anywhere else in the world until the resurgence of race hatred in Nazi, Jew-hating Germany.

In a number of historical accounts of racial attitudes in the South, authors find it difficult to explain the virulent race antagonism that flourished with the advent of such politicians as Ben Tillman in South Carolina and Vardeman in Mississippi. Many have laid it to the recalcitrance of the blacks with freedom, to the education, indeed, which the schoolmarm brought to the ex-slaves. Our newer knowledge, viewing the breaking of the white class structure as a result of the Civil War, with the emergence of new leaders from the masses to make articulate long-smoldering economic hatred of the blacks, may assign the catastrophic changes in race relations that did take place notably in the 90's to the same complex of factors which bred Jew-baiting in Germany, and that perhaps breeds both Jew and Negro baiting in America today.

Whatever the reason, the schoolmarm fought in a lost cause: lost for bitter antagonism toward the uplift of the Negro, lost for desperate financial destitution that made impossible the provision of adequate funds for the education even of white children. And yet, as suggested above, the cause was not entirely lost; for in the little academies and grammar schools, where interrupted promise lent mockery to the pretentious names of "college" and "university," men and women were being educated to do, in their generation, what the missionaries had been unable to do—staff little schools for little children through the length and breadth of the land.

## II

For a time—perhaps now nearing its termination—we have enjoyed a reasonably objective appreciation and study of the problem presented in this country by the juxtaposition of what, it may be agreed, are diverse “races.” As opposed both to humanitarianism and racism, there has developed a theory for the interpretation of race relations in America which is studiously environmentalistic and materialistic. Beginning with the conviction that economic classes best characterize major trends in historical development, it defines the Negro group as a subordinate caste within the whole, itself stratified into various discrete economic and social classes.

Because of the persistence of social classes for a longer or shorter period after the economic classes that spawned them have begun to crumble, the role of the Negro caste is seen externally as helping to define social and economic class within the white group. The biracial world, with functions of an economic society poorly defined, results in the re-creation in the Negro caste of an approximation of the class structure characteristic of the white world without. There are “upper-class” Negroes as there are “upper-class” white persons, each as defined within their own group; but a sharp line separates the most “upper-class” Negroes from the farthest down “lower-class” white man.

Whatever the structure—and it is highly debatable that the caste-like contemporary status of Negroes may be defined, in a culture so subject to change as is ours, as a true caste—it is obvious that the theory gives a highly valuable frame of reference for evaluating the structure.<sup>1</sup> It adds light to an estimation of social values, and to a study of institutions, for both races. Indeed, it aids in appraising

<sup>1</sup> There is an extensive bibliography of recent date dealing with this subject. See, among others, Buell G. Gallagher, *American Caste and the Negro College* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938); Lloyd Warner, “Formal Education and the Social Structure,” *The Journal of Educational Sociology*, May 1936, pp. 524–531; “American Caste and Class,” *American Journal of Sociology*, September 1936, pp. 234–237; John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937); Allison Davis, “The Socialization of the Negro Adolescent,” *Journal of Negro Education*, July 1939.

types of individual personality within both races, but its greatest value, for this essay, lies in the interpretation it may give to the institution—the elementary school for Negro children—with which we are immediately concerned.

Another qualifying factor in the caste-class relations of the two races, and of the institutions which are part of the cultural pattern, is the simple fact of great poverty in the section where the majority of blacks live. Whether cause or effect, the fact that the South is poor adds and subtracts all along the line of biracial contacts. Here is a section with, relatively, most of the children and least of the wealth. Here is a section, likewise, where separate schools and the political implications of a “superior” and an “inferior” race permit a choice in the distribution of what few funds are available. Discrimination in the expenditure of public funds for Negro children, visible everywhere in the United States where Negro children represent the vast majority of children enrolled in a school (from Harlem to Chicago), is axiomatic in such a depressed economy. Perhaps the most significant index to the influence of the economic factor in the education of Negroes in the South is that it is possible to find urban communities where per capita expenditures for Negro children are higher than in certain rural areas for white children, where the white population finds itself concentrated on poor, hilly land.

If the South had greater resources, it would not be the South. If Mississippi had tax-yielding resources similar to those of California, it would not be the Mississippi we know, nor would the relations of Negroes and of whites be as they are. Yet, if a change in the concentration of wealth can be imagined, without a change in the proportion of Negroes in the population, it would mean that Mississippi would no longer have to apply a tax rate thirteen times as high as California’s to yield comparable educational revenue for each black or white child in the State; and, by that token, the prospect for the Negro elementary school in Mississippi, regardless of caste or of class, would be entirely changed.

## III

In addition to the insights that contemporary study of society has given into the nature of the structures involving Negroes and white persons in the South, there are equally valuable concepts regarding the nature of the process of accommodation that have recently come to light. In the face of horrifying descriptions of race conflict in any historical period, whether it be ante-bellum accounts of slavery, reminiscences of the horrors of Reconstruction, or contemporary analyses of trouble points, the fact remains that both whites and blacks involved in each of these periods have been human beings, with an immense capacity for accommodating themselves to difficulties which can easily be magnified, both in historical and spatial perspective. Negro slaves did not spend all of their lives grieving at their sad condition. White Southerners during Reconstruction spent less time agonizing at what was going on about them than have Messrs. Dixon, Griffith, Selznick, and Miss Mitchell; and indeed it is a moot question whether more tears were shed by the Negroes of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the whites of *The Clansman*, or by the readers of those classics.

People must eat, love, sleep, gossip, hate, whether black or white, regardless of caste or class, in the ante-bellum period or today. For a valuable picture of the machinery of accommodation, or, rather, of the lubrication of the machinery by which white and black manage to live bearable lives in contact with each other, we owe much to Doyle's *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South*.<sup>2</sup>

Theories of race adjustment must be in terms of generalities. Accommodations, however much cast in the general pattern, must be individual in nature. No general rule exists for these particularized adaptations of "etiquette." Stated another way, the general rule of caste would be so paralyzing to day-by-day behavior in the South that individual exceptions of a personal nature become the rule. The

<sup>2</sup> Bertram W. Doyle, *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1937).

South may be in process of becoming impersonalized as it grows industrial and urban; but where black meets white is still a realm of personal behavior.

This is important for all institutions, and particularly for such an institution as the school. All aspects of the administration of schools, for example, take on different meaning as compared to the general rule. The impersonalized role of a school teacher in a large urban center, where he may impersonally form associations and even unions for the improvement of his lot, has no counterpart in decentralized systems where teacher stands neighbor or kin to board member or superintendent. In even greater degree, though now subject to rapid change, is this true of schools for Negroes. The employment of a school supervisor, and a public greeting by the superintendent as "Gertrude" or "Sallie" is not always an effort to "put the supervisor in her place." Sometimes it is part of the personal touch which in turn is part of the pattern. There have been Negro college presidents who have been scorned by fellow Negroes because of their apparent predilection for fishing and hunting with influential white persons. The scoffers betray their ignorance of the pattern. The Negro may not golf or play bridge or chat informally at lunch with his white friend; but he may, honestly and with self-respect, bridge the chasm of race in an area into which the wavering line of caste does not extend.

Fear of the "furriner" is not confined to Negro-white relations. As one educator has said, school teachers from the Bronx are not overly welcome in Iowa. Perhaps even more than with white persons, however, the suspicion of "Negro furriners"—persons who might disturb the delicate balance of race adjustment in a community that feels well satisfied with its "solution"—is characteristic.



## IV

Reference has been made above to the importance of gross economic differentials in the relative support that may be expected to go to white and Negro schools in the South. As a dual function of the caste-economic structure, the limitation of economic opportunities for Negroes poses a difficult question for institutions designed to educate Negro children. In the professions Negroes are limited largely to services which they can render for their own people; and the low income of Negroes, together with the disadvantages under which Negro professionals labor in disposing of their wares, or in giving their clients the greatest return for payment, severely restricts the degree to which it may be expected that Negro professionals can monopolize services for Negroes. Discriminations that bar Negroes almost entirely from distributive occupations, from large-scale clerical fields, from skilled crafts, and, more recently, even from the underpaid hard labor, formerly "Negro," jobs are all matters of serious concern to those who would formulate an adequate or effective educational program. The problem of "general" versus "vocational" education is difficult enough in planning the education of young white people, who, presumably, have merely the hazards of a disorganized world economic structure with which to contend. How much more profound is the dilemma of one who would plan intelligently for the education of Negro youth, who, in addition to the frightful state of the common social and economic structure surrounding us all, is confronted with an endless succession of special difficulties due to race!

Perhaps this gloomy reflection provides as satisfactory a juncture as any to consider the second separate task set forth as the aim of this paper; namely, the discussion of the implications which sociological knowledge has for the education of Negro children.

Knowledge—for what?

It is plain that only he whose occupation is social research could content himself with the bare analysis of what, in sober truth, seems

to be a desperate prospect for Negro youth. At the risk of stepping too brazenly from the role of social analyst—and Jeremiah—to that of reformist—and Pollyanna—this writer would posit, on the part of those engaged in the education of Negro children, the necessity of harking back a century to the promoters of the New England common-school revival, and their belief, not only in the “improvability of mankind,” but also in the essential possibility of achieving such an improvement by means of planned processes and institutions. In perspective, the condition and prospect for Negroes, and for the American culture of which they are a part, need not discourage optimism. The intangibles defy measurement; but even the tangibles might bear some weight in an estimation of the effect of formal education and educational institutions upon the status of Negroes since the time, seventy-five years ago, when the schoolmarm began to “uplift” the race. Are Negroes happier today than then? It is debatable. We do know that such indices as infant mortality, illegitimacy, tuberculosis, and family disorganization show decreasing ratios, and, over a long-time span, gratifying decreases. Such a volume as Frazier’s *The Negro Family in the United States*<sup>3</sup> is not only a magnificent sociological essay; it is also an exciting portrayal of the growth of social organization, of greater integration, over a period long enough to discount lag, slips, and collapse, and give cause to what may, indeed, be an entirely unscientific basis for the kind of faith that motivated the early missionaries.

In this process the elementary school for Negroes has indubitably played a large part in furnishing Negroes, however inadequately as yet, with the tools basic to participation in the American culture. Even the gloomiest portions of the picture of Negro social organization help define the functions—in high relief—of the school in which Negro children are enrolled. That school must choose its task with relation to the problems which social research helps define,

<sup>3</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939).

but always with reference to that (highly unscientific?) guide to action known as "The American Dream."

In the America of the dream—may it not also be an America compatible with the science of sociology?—there is a place for an institution whose function is the improvement of mankind. Such an institution, for the lowest stratum of the nation's economic pyramid, for the lowest stratum of the nation's social pyramid, must have a consciousness of the persistence of social structures, the immense inertia of the social mechanism. It must—if, indeed, institutions may be self-conscious—attempt an intelligent appraisal of the ways and degrees in which its task differs from that of similar institutions designed for integrating children into the general pattern of American life. This it must do while viewing the common goal. If, through the persistence for several centuries of various species of racial disadvantages, its clientele lacks skills and understandings common to the average of other populations, this institution needs to modify its methods and to be content to reach first the apparent needs. Its primary function might be expressed as that of creating a literate population (as a cynic might, indeed, propose as an unrealized function of all American schools). Beyond this, the school for Negro children must socialize the Negro child, first, as a member of an underprivileged economic class, and, second, as a member of a despised social group—at the best, a semicaste.

And here the personalities of social analyst and reformer find final disassociation. To teach children to read—when their parents are illiterate, and the culture too destitute to provide material for them to read. To teach children to be clean, when the housing afforded by the economic system, the type of labor engaged in, the pitiful clothing they have money to buy make cleanliness, neatness, order a task for Hercules. To teach children to have self-respect, when the structure, we are told, negates self-respect, because it negates racial respect. To teach children respect for life, when the high homicide rate of their parents, we are told, derives from the pattern

of violence woven by the superior caste to keep the lower caste subordinated. Yes—each is to be done. The schoolmarms did it, and so must we.

As it brings into sharp relief the difficulties inherent in social change, sociology also makes realistic the long-time character of any change. This patience with institutions is a great virtue. If, to understanding and patience, there can be added something of the opposite impatience with things as they are that characterized the early missionary teachers, the fourth generation of Negroes since the schoolmarms first came should be best equipped of all for the slow process of acculturation.