

The Negro and Crime.

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[Professor Du Bois is well known as the leading writer among the colored people of this country on social questions affecting his race.—ED.]

THE development of a negro criminal class after emancipation was to be expected. It is impossible for such a social revolution to take place without giving rise to a class of men, who, in the new stress of life, under new responsibilities, would lack the will and power to make a way, and would consequently sink into vagrancy, poverty and crime. Indeed it is astounding that a body of people whose family life had been so nearly destroyed, whose women had been forced into concubinage, whose labor had

been enslaved and then set adrift penniless, that such a nation should in a single generation be able to point to so many pure homes, so many property-holders, so many striving law abiding citizens. "The vast majority of the colored people," says *The Atlanta Constitution*, "would no more commit heinous crime than would the corresponding white class," and the Rev. Dr. Hoss declares in the *Nashville Christian Advocate*, of which he is editor:

"The negroes on the whole have done aston-

ishly well. Their record since the war has been almost as honorable as the one they made while the conflict was raging. To hold the entire race responsible for the outrages committed by a few thousands, or a few score thousands of its members, is not just or right."

In the town of Palmetto, where the recent disturbance began, it was only last December that a Methodist conference declared:

"We observe with gratitude the sympathetic and cordial relations between the white and colored people of this village and community, and the mutual co-operation between them in Christian work and in civil life."

If one thing is certain, then, it is that the negro criminal in no Southern community represents the mass of the race, or can rightly be mistaken for it. Even in the matter of sexual crime the most prominent paper in the South declared editorially that "ninety-five per cent." of the negro men "are as respectful toward white women as any people on earth." And whenever the terrible crime of rape has been beyond reasonable doubt proven upon a negro, he has been found to be among the most ignorant and degraded of his people. The sexual looseness among the negroes themselves, which the nation that taught them now taunts them with, is slowly but surely disappearing. The rate of illegitimacy among them is probably less than in Austria or Italy, and it would be still smaller if law and public opinion in the South gave the defenseless black girl half the protection it throws about the white girl.

Granting then, as every fair-minded man must, that "in almost all the elements of civilization the race, as a whole, has made distinct and gratifying progress," to quote Dr. W. W. Laudrum, Pastor First [white] Baptist Church of Atlanta, Ga., the question then comes—and this is the crucial question—What is chiefly responsible for crime among Southern negroes, outside the economic effects of emancipation?

The first and greatest cause of negro crime in the South is the convict-lease system. States which use their criminals as sources of revenue in the hands of irresponsible speculators, who herd girls, boys, men and women promiscuously together without distinction or protection, who parade chained

and pistols, and then plunge into this abyss of degradation the ignorant little black boy who steals a chicken or a handful of peanuts—what can such States expect but a harvest of criminals and prostitutes? Does it not seem natural that the State which produced Sam Hose is guilty, as *The Atlanta Constitution* declared March 22, of "the burning shame of converting our penal establishments into schools for crime?" and we are prepared to hear, notwithstanding the awful revelations of Governor Atkinson's prison commission:

"Georgia has not even made a beginning yet in the right direction. The provision of our new penal law will prove the veriest sham. We must get at the issue straight and separate juvenility from crime."

The next greatest cause of negro crime in the South is the attitude of the courts. The Southern courts have erred in two ways: One, in treating the crime of whites so leniently that red-handed murderers walk scot-free and the public has lost faith in methods of justice. The other, in treating the crimes and misdemeanors of negroes with such severity that the lesson of punishment is lost through pity for the punished. When, therefore, the number of negroes in Southern penal institutions is cited as evidence of their lawlessness, students must not forget this double standard of justice, which can best be illustrated by the following clippings from *The Atlanta Constitution* of January 22d:

"Egbert Jackson [colored], aged thirteen, was given a sentence of \$50, or ten months in the chain gang for larceny from the house.

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"The most affecting scene of all was the sentencing of Joe Redding, a white man, for the killing of his brother, John Redding. . . . Judge --- is a most tender-hearted man, and heard the prayers and saw the tears, and tempered justice with moderation, and gave the modern Cain two years in the penitentiary."

Of course Jackson could pay no such fine and went to the chain gang.

The third cause of crime is the increasing lawlessness and barbarity of mobs. Let a negro be simply accused of any crime from barn-burning to rape and he is liable to be seized by a mob, given no chance to defend

himself, given neither trial, judge nor jury, and killed. Passing over the acknowledged fact that many innocent negroes have thus been murdered, the point that is of greater gravity is that lawlessness is a direct encouragement to crime. It shatters the faith of the mass of negroes in justice; it leads them to shield criminals; it makes race hatred fiercer; it discourages honest effort; it transforms horror at crime into sympathy for the tortured victim; and it blinds the hands and lessens the influence of those race leaders who are striving to preach forbearance and patience and honest endeavor to their people. It teaches eight million wronged people to despise a civilization which is not civilized.

Finally, the last cause of negro crime is the exaggerated and unnatural separation in the South of the best classes of whites and blacks. A drawing of the color line, that extends to street-cars, elevators and cemeteries, which leaves no common ground of

meeting, no medium of communication, no ties of sympathy between two races who live together and whose interests are at bottom one—such a discrimination is more than silly, it is dangerous. It makes it possible for the mass of whites to misinterpret the aims and aspiration of the negroes, to mistake self-reliance for insolence, and condemnation of lynch-law for sympathy with crime. It makes it possible for the negroes to believe that the best people of the South hate and despise them, and express their antipathy in proscribing them, taunting them and crucifying them. Such terrible misapprehensions are false, and the sooner some way is made by which the best elements of both races can sympathize with each other's struggles, and in a calm Christian spirit discuss them together—the sooner such conferences can take place all over the South the sooner lynch-law will disappear and crime be abated.

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