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THE ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF RACE PREJUDICE

BY W. E. BURGHARDT DU BOIS,
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THE more or less theoretical problem of race prejudice to-day enters largely into the domain of practical politics, and has become of increasing importance in the United States not only because it involves to the Negro in large sections of the country a denial of the principles of democracy, thus engendering passionate feelings against such discrimination, but on account of the unwisdom from an economic standpoint of repressing the colored races.

We have in the United States to-day a series of rotten boroughs or districts, the political power of which is tremendously and unfairly increased by the wholesale disfranchisement of their voters, until one man in Georgia or Mississippi often exercises as much power in the counsels of the National government as seven men in Massachusetts. Moreover, these Southern voters have had their political power increased so enormously, not because of political efficiency (since they are the most illiterate part of the Nation), but because strong racial prejudice has led them to deny the right to vote to black men. There has been some pretense of letting a few competent blacks vote, but as the new Senator from Mississippi says boldly, "There is to-day no such thing as Negro suffrage in Mississippi and never will be as long as the white men of the State stand together." Thus a second political complication enters. The all-powerful rump of the voting population of the South can not to-day consider the merits of any political question presented to them. They must vote always and simply to keep negroes down. Outside of all questions of party such a denial of the fundamental principles of democracy is dangerous to the Nation. It means that there are certain parts of the country where reason can not be applied to

the settlement of great political questions. Such weak spots in the political body are sure to become the seat of disease, and so long as the race prejudice in the South shows its result in such disorganization of government and disfranchisement of a large part of the working class and in an unequal balance of political power, as compared with the rest of the Nation, just so long race prejudice is bound to be a burning question of practical politics.

The question, however, is not simply political, it is not simply the old question of the negro's right to vote,—a problem which has been with us so long that we are disposed to give it up in despair. Today the problem is becoming more and more economic. We are seeing arise in the South two great groups of laborers: one white and one black, one with the power of the ballot and one disfranchised. That the disfranchisement of the black workingmen is practically complete there can be no reasonable doubt. These two groups of workingmen are coming more and more into economic competition, and the industrial education of the negro is bound to increase this competition. The result is a situation which is being taken advantage of by two different kinds of selfish interests. The politician in the South who is out of a job finds it more and more to his interest to stir up the passions of the white workingman who has the ballot by appealing to the grossest and worst instincts of race prejudice, and by representing all the present and possible economic ills of the white workingman as due to his black competitor. We have already seen in the South instance after instance of demagogues arising with wide-spread political power by these means and we have known the horror of the Atlanta riot as a sort of first-fruits of this newer economic race danger.

On the other hand, the exploiting capitalist is also tempted to transmute race prejudice in the coin of the realm. He says to his white laborers, "I am not in business for my health; I seek the cheapest competent labor. Larger and larger number of blacks are demanding work at low wages; if you are dissatisfied and continue to make trouble and demand too much I will replace you by black men." He turns to his black laborers, "You are lazy and incompetent—unless you work harder and stop complaining I will replace you with white men." This again leads each class to regard the other as the chief cause of low wages and unfair treatment; and the situation in the South affects the labor problem over the whole nation, and is destined to affect it more and more. The high level of wages in the North can not entirely

withstand the competition of the lower level of wages in the South, and fight as the white laborer may at once to keep up wages and to exclude the black man from his union, he is bound to lose for he is fighting black men, while black men are fighting starvation and must consequently fight harder. So that here again we have a result of race prejudice which is bringing us face to face with a great labor problem.

But the results of race prejudice do not stop even here. The United States is today going through a great economic crisis. It is changing from being a country which raises and exports food stuffs and imports its manufactured articles, into a country which largely consumes its own food stuffs and exports its manufactures. Now the export of food from the United States brought us into contact with European civilization, but the export of manufactured articles is bringing us into contact with the darker world; with Asia, Africa, the West Indies and South America. In our endeavor, however, to open markets for trade in these countries and with these peoples we are being brought face to face with the unpleasant fact that America is not liked in the darker world; she has gone out of her way to insult many of these people. She has enslaved "Niggers," sneered at "Dagos," insulted Chinese and Japanese, and found no words too contemptuous to express her feeling for the "mongrel" races of Central and Southern America. Under such circumstances our invasion of the world market must be under a great moral handicap. There can be no doubt but that a large part of our difficulty in getting South American trade is because of our free exhibition of racial prejudice. In China and the East our prejudices have not helped our economic campaign, and the future is ominous.

Viewing then the situation calmly and judicially, it must frankly be confessed that race prejudice is costing the United States heavily: it is costing us certain fundamental principles of democratic government, peace and development in the labor world, and enhanced difficulty of getting a world market for our goods.

Facing now such a cost, it is reasonable to ask, Why are we paying it? What return are we getting out of it? Is it really worth while? Most people when asked about their prejudices as to race say simply: it is a matter of personal like or dislike; some people like one kind of people and some another, similar to a preference for one sort of food over another. The difficulty is, however, that human antipathies between men and men

seldom remain at this comparatively harmless stage. The preferences take on a vitality and warmth, a value and importance that makes us not satisfied to indulge our likes and dislikes, but to wish to force them on our neighbors and to this end we are nearly always driven, or think we are driven, to use three weapons of offence, which are in the world history of tremendous import. These are: personal insult, persecution and repression.

We forcibly keep certain men from occupying certain positions or entering certain careers. We deliberately persecute some people by means, for instance, of Jim-Crow cars or other discriminations, or we heap personal insult and ridicule upon them. It may be admitted that there are perhaps times in this world when it is necessary and defensible to take a human being by the throat, slowly choke his life out and throw his dead carcass to one side; or if we are not prepared personally to go to that extreme, it is, I am told, at times justifiable to render the life of certain persons so uncomfortable that they will eliminate themselves; and finally it certainly seems to many as though personal insult was now and then necessary to repress some sorts of undesirable men; but despite all this, every civilized being hesitates and shudders at the use of these three awful weapons; and they hesitate because these weapons are dangerous things, not simply deadening, corroding, fatal to the victims, but doubly dangerous to those who get into the habit of using them; from the use of insult grows the arrogant, overbearing nation which so often blindly misses the way of truth; from the bigotry of persecution grows the dead rot of mental death, and from war and murder comes national as well as individual death. Worse than that, these weapons of race prejudice often fail to effect their object. Doubtless objectionable individuals and groups have been persecuted and insulted out of existence or simply massacred. But not always. Often with fierce persistence they have lived, directly or indirectly—consciously or unconsciously to avenge their wrongs. At least these weapons of offense are so despicable and their efficiency so questionable that before we continue their use, ought we not to ask ourselves frankly: just what it is that we really want to accomplish in this matter of racial prejudice?

I think that most people would say upon first thought that they want to be able to live in a world which is in most respects according to their liking and according to their idea of fitness, both in persons and in things; but so soon as such a desire is expressed, it must be said plainly, without further argument, that

such a consummation is largely impossible. The simplest and most exclusive club can not in its membership suit all the people included. We must always come more or less in contact, even in intimate contact, with people whom we do not like. This is true of all ages, but it is especially true in the modern world. A few centuries ago the world existed in such air-tight compartments that groups could isolate themselves and live to themselves. To-day we are demanding vociferously the policy of the Open Door. We are demanding, now chiefly for economic reasons, but also in part for political and social reasons, a world-wide contact of men with men. It is expressed to-day in the right of white men to go anywhere they choose and be treated with consideration and respect. It will be expressed to-morrow in the right of the colored races to return the visits. Under no easily conceivable circumstances can the future world be peopled simply with one of the present social groups or with one of the existing races. Some people, to be sure, dream of a future white world. A glance at any map or newspaper will prove that this is, to say the least, highly improbable. Today the human race throughout the world contains a vast numerical preponderance of colored peoples and the population among these colored races is probably increasing faster than among the whites, so that in the future the aggregate of the Black and Yellow races may outnumber the white race.

Many people would frankly acknowledge this. They would expect a future world of Black and Yellow and White men. But they say: we wish these several races to be kept in their places.

Here again there arise difficulties. What are the respective places of these races? Is the easily assumed hierarchy composed by Ruling White, Servile Black and Docile Yellow men really the last word in social evolution? History is not reassuring on this point, present tendencies are disconcerting, and Science is helplessly spreading its hands. Wise men acknowledge that it is perfectly possible that Black and Yellow men may yet reach and surpass white civilization. This may not seem probable, but in human history the Improbable has often happened.

But let all this be as it may, certain it is that if by natural constitution the great races of men arrange themselves in a hierarchy of ability, efficiency and development, then no such social weapons as are now used by racial prejudice are necessary to reinforce natural law. Education will keep the superior races

from degeneracy by intermarriage far better than organized insult; persecution will be quite unnecessary to eliminate such races as are unable to survive under civilized conditions; and Repression of ambition and ability will be attended to by the law of social gravity much more effectively than by "Jim-Crow" legislation. In fine, why should we threaten the efficiency of government, the development of industry and the peace of the world by imperfect and questionable human devices?

So soon as the prejudiced are forced into this inevitable dilemma, then the real bitterness and indefensibility of their attitude is apt to be revealed; they say bluntly that they do not care what "Niggers," "Dagos," "Chinks," or "Japs" may be capable of—they do not like them and they propose to keep such folk in a place of permanent inferiority to the white race—by peaceful policy if possible, by brute force if necessary. And when a group, a nation or a world assumes this attitude, it is handling dynamite. *There is in this world no such force as the force of a man determined to rise.* The human soul can not be permanently chained.

Is it not then of supreme importance that here in America we refuse to aid and abet any such attempt and that we refuse to try to hold back by insult, persecution and repression those dark masses of human beings who, though beaten to their knees and bloody with blows, are still doggedly determined to be men?

In view of all this it is a matter not simply of politics but of the widest and broadest statesmanship, of economic foresight and deepest religious thought to see that race prejudice in the United States is combatted and corrected and lessened.

The first and most obvious corrective is intelligence. Today it is both significant and natural that in those parts of the United States where illiteracy is greatest, racial prejudice is most furious, uncompromising and blood-thirsty. Would it not be a wise step to follow the suggestion of Dr. Felix Adler and others and revive the Blair bill: to enact a national law by which Federal aid should be given to free common school education in all states where illiteracy exceeds a certain minimum percentage, and continue to be given so long as such excess continues? I can not conceive of any more statesmanlike action than this and no action of greater promise. Let us then, as a first step toward fighting the baneful effects of race prejudice in America and in the world, *revive the Blair bill.*

W. E. Burghardt Du Bois