

RACIAL SELF-EXPRESSION

By E. FRANKLIN FRAZIER

I.



CONCURRENT with the growing group consciousness among the colored people there has come into prominence two rather widely divergent opinions as to the principles which should govern the development of the group in America. The opinion represented by one group is that colored people should undertake to conform in every respect to the culture about them, while another group holds that they should develop their own unique culture. Although these two viewpoints can not be said to take this apparently mutually contradictory form in the minds of all leaders, they indicate to a large extent two emerging philosophies of racial development which are receiving emphasis by their respective protagonists. Moreover, it should be added that these two theories have been present since the Negro began to assert himself as a free man in this country, but have received new accentuation by the so-called renaissance of Negro artists and thinkers. The debate in the *NATION* between Langston Hughes and George Schuyler was a skirmish in the clash between these two viewpoints. While the younger Negro artists are generally regarded as exponents of the opinion favoring a unique culture among the colored people, there is apparent disagreement among them. Countee Cullen's insistence that he wants to be a universal poet rather than a Negro poet is indicative of this lack of unanimity.

The issue between these two theoretical standpoints should not be confused with the more practical but less critical programs of certain Negro leaders and Southern whites, based upon the assumption that innate but not unequal racial endowments make it necessary that each race develop its own separate culture, with the corollary often expressed but always implied that intermarriage would cause a confusion or neutralization of their respective racial endowments. This new appreciation of the racial gifts of the Negro is naïve and seems to be a sublimation of the old admonition to the Negro that he should strive to be the "best possible Negro and not a poor imitation of the white man."

While it is improbable that either of these theoretic viewpoints will issue into immediate practical consequences, it is well to examine the assumptions upon which they are based. It is likely that both philosophies are rationalizations of tendencies which are observable in the different developments which are taking place in the experience of the col-

ored group in America. In this essay, the writer hopes to contribute to the clarification of the issues involved and to evaluate the claims of the respective schools of opinion. As a first step in this analysis, the writer should say something about the relation between race and culture.

II.

ONE of the first results of the general acceptance of the evolutionary hypothesis was the attempt to explain racial differences in terms of the evolutionary process. For example, an attempt was made to show that contemporary "savages" possessed keener sensory powers than civilized man and therefore stood in the evolutionary scale closer to the lower animals than modern man. The comparatively smaller average of brain volume of certain races was taken as conclusive evidence of the retarded evolution of these races. Likewise the assumed mental traits of primitive man were supposed to bear testimony to his inferior evolutionary status. According to Spencer, primitive man lacked emotional control and the power of intellectual concentration. He was explosive and showed a marked deficiency in the capacity for abstract thought. Moreover, according to the classical anthropologists, social evolution followed a unilinear course; and that among the peoples of simple culture today, we had a view of the past evolution of modern man. But of greater importance to our subject was the assumption that primitive man's simple culture was a reflection of his incomplete or arrested physical and mental evolution.

These *à priori* assumptions based upon superficial observations and favorable data have been totally discredited by the critical field studies of modern anthropologists. Even the recent claim of Bean to having discovered significant anatomical differences in the Negro's brain has been discredited by Mall's subsequent findings. There is a tendency to discard even the term 'primitive' and substitute 'preliterate' in referring to peoples possessing simple cultures both because of the connotations of the older term and because the essential difference between primitive and modern man seems to be the absence of a written tradition among the former. The sensory powers of primitive peoples as well as their capacity for emotional control and abstract thought do not appear to differ essentially from those of civilized man. The recent attempt on the part of Levy-Bruhl, a French sociologist, to establish chiefly on the basis of accounts of travellers and missionaries a different order of mentality for preliterate peoples,

has met a similar fate at the hands of field workers, who have shown that preliterate peoples are as logical as modern man in the sphere of secular activities of life. There is a rather general agreement among ethnologists and sociologists that cultural advance is due to the contact of peoples rather than the flowering of the genius of a particular racial stock.

There are, however, some sociologists who, while recognizing the inadequacy of the other criteria of racial differences, hold to the theory of differences in temperamental endowment in races. According to this theory, races select different elements of a culture when brought into contact with it. The writer will postpone comment on this assumption until he considers more specifically the issue which is the occasion for this essay.

III.

THE foregoing all too brief summary of the conclusions regarding the relation between race and culture would lead us to believe that there is scarcely any warrant for the proposal that the Negro develop a unique culture in harmony with his racial characteristics. This opinion receives further support even from those authorities who hold to differences in the intellectual capacity of different races. These authorities hold that the intellectual powers of the Negroes and whites show the same range but that there is a greater frequency of those of superior intelligence among the whites. If the Negro were not differentiated from the whites by color, individuals under our competitive social organization would find their places according to their merit and the question of uniqueness of culture would never have been raised. The issue between the philosophies we are examining seems to resolve itself into the old issue of every nationalistic group. At first the group attempts to lose itself in the majority group, disdaining its own characteristics. When this is not possible there is a new valuation placed upon these very same characteristics and they are glorified in the eyes of the group. The same tendencies are observable in the case of the Negro group. There is, however, a conflict between the two tendencies noted above. On the one hand there is an attempt to efface Negroid characteristics and among the extremists of this group to dispense with the appellation, Negro; and on the other hand a glorification of things black. If the New Negro is turning within his group for new values and inspiration for group life, he is following the course of other nationalistic groups.

But to turn within the group experience for materials for artistic creation and group tradition is entirely different from seeking in the biological inheritance of the race for new values, attitudes and a different order of mentality. In the philosophy of those who stand for a unique culture among the Negroes there is generally the latter assumption. Moreover, while the group experience of the Ne-

groes in America may be a fruitful source for the materials of art and to some extent a source of group tradition, it offers a very restricted source for building up a thorough-going group life in America. By the entrance of the Negro into America, he was practically stripped of his culture. His whole group experience in America has been directed towards taking over cultural forms about him. In spite of the isolation in which he has lived, the Negro has succeeded in doing this to a remarkable degree. From the beginning he has not been able to draw upon a group tradition outside of America. When he has been charged with imitation of white models, he has been forced to plead guilty because there were no others. If the Negro had undertaken to shut himself off from the white culture about him and had sought light from within his experience, he would have remained on the level of barbarism. Even at the present time, if the Negro seeks relief from his conflict with the white majority by a flight from the reality of the culture about him, his development will be arrested and he will be shunted from the main highway of American life. In this respect the Negro's position is different from any other nationalistic group in America. While they can maintain their group life by drawing upon the national tradition from the Old World, and participate only to a small degree in the American tradition, the Negro has no source to draw on outside of America and only an inadequately assimilated American tradition from his past in this country.

It is quite possible that those who advocate a unique culture among Negroes would agree on the whole with the position taken above but would insist that the main point at issue is the difference in temperamental endowment. Therefore, as promised above, we shall turn to the consideration of this question. It has been pointed out by some that the facility with which the evangelical denominations spread among Negroes as well as the spirituals, and the seeming lack of strong economic motives, are indications of the peculiar racial temperament of the Negro. In the latter respect he is often contrasted with the Jew. But even here we can not say dogmatically that racial temperament has been the decisive factor in the emphasis placed by the Negroes on certain elements of American culture. There are historical and social factors which are adequate reasons to account for the fact that the majority of Negroes are Baptists and Methodists as well as the predilection of the Jew for economic activities. In Africa the Negro has always been a trader and his markets are an outstanding feature of African cultures. Even in America we find a remarkable development of business enterprises and this type of activities has become for many of the younger Negroes the surest means for the group to acquire status.

Mr. James Weldon Johnson has indicated, it appears to the writer, in "God's Trombones" the unique contribution of the Negro artists. In this

unique work of art he has used the literary language of America to give artistic expression to the racial experience of the Negro in America. Whatever of racial temperament there is in these poems has been made articulate through cultural forms which were acquired by the artist in America. This does not deny that it is possible that the Negro artist working on the materials of the Negro's experience in America will create greater works than white artists. But we can not overlook the fact that at present white writers have surpassed Negro writers on the whole in the use of this material. While it may be true that at times the Negro has attempted to appropriate elements of American culture which have justified the rebuke that he was a "poor imitation of the white man" it was due to the fact that his group experience in America had not prepared him for such a rôle, but not because anything in his biological inheritance made the appropriation of such cultural traits incongruous. As the Negro group becomes more differentiated we see developing the same social types that are found in the white majority. There is a growing group of black Babbitts who are indistinguishable in their mental attitudes from the white Babbitts. The racial temperament of the Negro will assert itself in the cultural traits which he takes over; but such an indeterminable factor can not become the norm for determining the lines along which the Negro should build his culture. But it may be asked if it is desirable for the Negro to acquire uncritically all the traits of American culture. The remainder of this essay will be directed to an attempt to give a brief answer to this question.

The very fact that the issue between these two philosophies of racial development has been raised indicates a sophistication that could never have developed in cultural isolation. Negro leaders have enjoyed a cosmopolitan experience that enables them to view objectively their racial experience, as well as American culture and cultural traits in general. This appears to be increasingly one of the chief functions of the Negro intellectual. His strategic position makes him a critic of values for his group. But it still remains an open question how far the Negro group can escape the adoption of the cultural forms of America. One example will suffice to show that even in the sphere of economic life some selection may be possible the Negro must fit into the competitive industrial life about him either as a laborer or capitalist; but if the co-operative system of production and distribution offers superior spiritual values, then as far as practical he should develop in his economic life a co-operative economic technique. This he should do rather than slavishly take over both the form and spirit of modern industrialism. If such a course finds support in the racial experience of the Negro in America or in his temperamental endowment, the task will be easier and will be a distinct contribution to the general fund of American culture. Likewise, if because of racial temperament there is

a greater disposition on the part of Negroes to enjoy life than among the whites and this is recognized as a superior value, without sacrificing the efficiency of the group this trait should not be smothered by forcing the Negro's life into generally accepted molds.

Something should be said about another aspect of this question; namely, the building up of a group tradition. It seems to the writer that any such effort should be encouraged only so far as it is compatible with a fuller participation in American culture. In this matter the experience of immigrant groups has a lesson for the Negro. Those immigrant groups which have maintained the greatest group efficiency have suffered the least amount of social mal-adjustment. The efficiency of their group organization has been the best means for fitting their members for participation in American life. One of the primary needs of the Negro in America where he is not treated as an individual is the development of group efficiency. The work of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History under Dr. Carter G. Woodson is very rapidly creating a group tradition which is necessary for group morale. This is a socializing process through which the individual members of a group acquire status. This is a healthy sign among Negroes and need not be incompatible with their struggle for fuller participation in American culture so long as it does not increase their isolation.

IV.

THIS discussion has undertaken to evaluate the over-simplified assumption expressed and implied by those who are advocating a unique cultural development for the Negro, that our modern culture is the expression of certain special intellectual and temperamental traits and that the Negro should build a culture in harmony with his racial endowment. It was pointed out that the racial experience of the Negro was unique because of historical and social factors rather than of biological inheritance. Even those traits which are so universally ascribable to temperamental rather than intellectual differences were shown to have a possible explanation in social factors. While for the artist this unique experience was recognized as a fertile source, it was not deemed adequate for the building up of a thorough-going racial tradition which would afford maximum individual development. On the other hand, the utility of a group tradition built even upon African material for group efficiency was given due recognition. But finally it was shown that any nationalistic program that made the Negro seek compensations in a barren racial tradition and thereby escape competition with the white man which was an inevitable accompaniment of full participation in American culture, would lead to intellectual, spiritual and material impoverishment such as one finds among the Southern mountain whites.