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## A WHITE AND BLACK WORLD IN AMERICAN LABOR AND POLITICS

ABRAM L. HARRIS

**D**URING the past presidential campaign, leaders of the National Conference for Progressive Political Action were uncertain of the attitude that the rank and file would take toward Negro affiliation and consequently hesitated to include Negro representation in the movement.<sup>1</sup> But when certain Negroes who, like the progressives, recognized the political and economic ineptitude of the ascendant parties and therefore the necessity of re-aligning political forces, without regard to the race problem, insisted upon identification with the movement, the executive council of the N. C. P. P. A. invited Negro liberals to the July convention. The speech of a single unofficial Negro delegate stirred the convention and perhaps led to the creation of a Negro Division with headquarters at Chicago. It would be very interesting to know just how successful the Negro Division was in diverting Negro votes from the Republicans to the Progressives. Of course an exact estimate is impossible. Negro intellectuals, a mere handful when compared with the masses of Negro voters, may have openly endorsed the La Follette-Wheeler combination, but this is no reliable index to the distribution of the Negro vote. But from the small amount of campaigning done it should follow that the progressive vote among Negroes was almost nil. The election returns from various sections of the country seemed to indicate that the Negro voted almost solidly for Coolidge and

Dawes and in the local elections voted the Democratic ticket or assisted in electing independent candidates possessing liberal views on the race question or in exceptional cases elected Negro candidates.<sup>2</sup>

The writer has observed a most intimate relationship with the Negro bourgeoisie which comprises a large number of race-conscious business folk, lawyers, doctors, etc.; the Negro of intellectual aspirations—teachers, writers, preachers and social workers; and the Negro workers whose racial attitudes are molded by the former classes. The usual indictment made against the progressive movement by the Negro worker was that the Conference for Progressive Political Action could not be liberal to the Negro when the very unions which dominated it not only discriminated against Negro membership in the union but denied Negro workers the right to enter certain crafts.<sup>3</sup> The other two classes of Negroes held that the progressives did not want the Negro vote inasmuch as the La Follette-Wheeler platform made no special appeal to Negroes by endorsing a federal anti-lynching bill, or the elimination of segregation in government buildings and disfranchisement in Southern states.

Perhaps it is regrettable that intelligent Negro groups display such a lack of appreciation for the general politico-economic reforms at which liberal statesmen aim. The consummation of these reforms may do more toward liberating the Negro from

<sup>1</sup> The writer had considerable correspondence about this matter with Mr. Arthur E. Holder, Secretary of Executive Committee, The National Conference for Progressive Political Action, Washington, D. C.

<sup>2</sup> The reader should remember that this statement is conjectural. The writer derives his estimate from a study of election returns contained in Negro newspapers during this period.

<sup>3</sup> Allusion was made here to the Railway Brotherhoods and the International Machinists Association.

privations which he suffers as a submerged group than all of the voluble enunciations of an abstract doctrine of inalienable rights or recommendations for federal anti-lynching bills. But the Negro's apathy toward economic reform and progressive political action must be considered, first, in the light of the strained relationship which exists between the races generally, and the white and black workers specifically; secondly, the sentiments which his experience has occasioned him to build about the Republican Party; and, thirdly, the persistent exploitation of this historic sentimentalism by the Republican Party with the aid of adroit and sometimes unscrupulous Negro politicians.

The Negro's demand for political remedies for his ills and his disinterest in simon-pure political and economic reforms has been mistakenly attributed to a rapidly increasing race consciousness. From the preceding analysis this is hardly tenable. As far back as the late sixties the Negro displayed a similar apathy to economic reform, requesting that special legislative reforms be enacted to meet racial proscriptions. When the National Labour Union was espousing Greenbackism as the means of raising the economic status of the workers, Negroes under the leadership of John M. Langston, a Republican politician, participated in the first two labor congresses held by the organization. Langston cautioned his followers against the Democrats in the conventions. An open rift soon occurred, and the Negroes organized separately but sent delegates to the congresses of the white National Labor Union. The platforms adopted at the colored conventions differed very appreciably from those of the white workers. Greenbackism, taxation of government bonds, taxation of rich for war purposes, and independent political action by the workers were carefully

avoided. Such measures were possibly omitted for fear of offending the Republican Party or because their full significance was not fully appreciated.<sup>4</sup> The Negro conventions were chiefly concerned with education and the creation of special homestead acts for Negroes in the South. When the National Labor Union became the National Labor Party, the Negro delegates finally cut the bare thread which held them to the union. One delegate, Isaac Myers, from the colored National Labor Union stated that independent political action by labor was unnecessary, since all reforms could be obtained through the Republican Party.<sup>5</sup>

The Republican Party is looked upon by white Northern workers as representing the interests of the business and commercial class; and the Democratic Party, until recently, as more nearly representative of working class aspirations. The southern workers make no such distinction. They are wedded to the Democratic Party not so much because of a belief in its fidelity to their economic interest as because of the historic significance the Republican Party bears to the Negro with whom white workers are at cross purposes.<sup>6</sup> So the Southern white workers' alignment with a progressive political movement will more than likely depend upon its attitude toward the Negro

<sup>4</sup> Vid. *History of Labor in the United States*, Commons and Associates, Vol. II, page 137-145.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Commons and Associates, *History of Labor in the United States*.

<sup>6</sup> During the recent presidential campaign John Hopkins Halls, Jr., Virginia State Commissioner of Labor, issued a public statement which pooh-poohed the idea that the Virginia State Federation of Labor endorsed the progressives. Furthermore, he held that the Democratic Party's history proved its friendliness to labor. This was typical of the Southern workers' response to progressivism and independent political action by the workers. In this connection see "New Feuds in the Democratic Party" by Mark Sullivan, *World's Work*, April, 1925.

workers. In short, conflicting race psychologies vitiate any reapproachment between white and black workers and thus render impossible the unanimity of feeling and purpose necessary for independent working class action in politics. How may these psychologies be accounted for? Will not the stimulation of intellectual candor through education shatter race traditions and mythically founded hates? Our attention will be devoted in the rest of the essay to answering these questions.

#### THE SOCIAL HERITAGE FROM THE SLAVE REGIME

Slavery as an economic circumstance involving black slaves and white freemen gave rise to certain psychologies which, as the status of subject and dominant groups became fixed by law and custom, determined the character of contact and the extent to which it should take place between whites and blacks. Hence the inevitable separation of whites and blacks into different spheres of thinking and acting. Each effort made by the subject group to change the *status quo* has met the stronger resistance power of the dominant. But in his dealings with the most dominant members of the white race, the Negro, oftentimes, is highly revered, providing he keeps "in his place." In the South, Negroes who are in the capacity of servants sit in sections reserved on public conveyances and in public places for white persons. A Negro woman may suckle a white child, but marriage between that child and one of the Negro woman's offspring would not only be considered preposterous by the white parents but in all likelihood condemned by the white child. Or, in the North, where Negroes have fewer legal restrictions, the association between white and black university students, for instance, is seldom free and intimate, while other

students possessed with decidedly negroid physical traits are received as social equals—as long as such students are foreigners, or mistaken for foreigners.

In any of these cases, or similar ones, the attitudes upon which racial separation is built are not reflexes of pure race (color) psychology. Were these feelings attributable to color revulsion white infants would not be given to black women to suckle; whites would not relish the food prepared by their black cooks; nor would they have consorted with black women in supplying the country with a mulatto population. The feeling is apparently that due to a difference in *class* accentuated by dissimilar physical traits which distinguish the dominant from the subject group. Yet the relationship between the Negro and the upper-class whites is far more amicable, albeit paternalistic, than that existing between the Negro and the economically disadvantaged whites. Here, class antipathy is acute.<sup>7</sup> To this class of whites the Negro is not only a dangerous competitor for economic preferment in the social order but a *nigger*—something far lower in the human scale than anything white could ever descend. On the other hand, the Negro, partly conscious of this intra-racial competition, perceives the white workers as descendants of "po' whites" whom he learned to despise under the slave regime.

The commonalty of economic interests between these classes of wage-earners is the hackneyed dictum of the radical propagandist. But appeals to these groups to unite for common action have been futile. Instead of labor solidarity one finds a slowly abating competition

<sup>7</sup> For the birth of this competition during the slave regime and resulting class hate, See J. R. Commons, *Documentary History of American Society*, Vol. II, page 367. Also Lodge, *English Colonies in America*, pages 70-72.

between skilled and unskilled,<sup>8</sup> and a silent persisting clash between white and black workers.<sup>9</sup> In many instances, the organization of the Negro workers is actually prohibited by the union's constitution—e.g., the International Association of Machinists, organized at Atlanta Georgia in 1889. A Negro social welfare organization has devoted much attention to discrimination against Negro workers by organized labor.<sup>10</sup> Through the efforts of one of its Board members who is also a member of the American Federation of Labor, agitation was led against the exclusion of Negro members by certain unions. At the Cincinnati Convention (1922) the Executive Council reported that it had brought as much pressure as possible, but without success, to induce the

<sup>8</sup> Since its inception in 1886, the American Federation of Labor has adhered very closely to organization upon a craft basis, each craft union being autonomous and self-determining. (See "Labor Unions at the Danger Line," F. L. Bullard, *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1923.) Negro Labor, for the most part unskilled, has been kept out of the labor movement by this policy of organization. In view of innovations in industrial technology and the encroachments of unskilled workers upon the skilled, the A. F. of L. has tried to meet industrial unionism halfway by creating departments. See "Revolutionary Unionism," page 139, *Trade Unionism in United States*, Robert Hoxie; "Revolution and Counter-Reformation," Chapter 9, *The History of Trade Unionism in the United States*, Selig Perlman; and "Evolution versus Amalgamation" Vol. 5, page 59, *The American Labor Year Book*, The Rand School of Social Science.

<sup>9</sup> The radical unions show a decided friendly attitude toward Negro workers. Especially is this true of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. The same may be said of the United Mine Workers in certain sections where the foreign element predominates. See "The Negro and Economic Radicalism," Abram L. Harris, Jr., *The Modern Quarterly*, February, 1925.

<sup>10</sup> The National Urban League, for social service among Negroes (Headquarters, New York City). The newly created Industrial Department of this organization has been devised for systematic handling of this situation.

Railway Carmen and the boiler-makers to change their constitutions so as to admit Negroes. However, the Council reported that it had organized six systems of adjustment boards to assist colored freight handlers, and that colored men had been organized in separate locals directly attached to the American Federation of Labor. Similarly in 1900 Samuel Gompers came out unequivocally for the inclusion of Negro workers in the American Federation of Labor. Despite these attempts to dissolve color barriers in the labor movement the majority of the crafts affiliated with the American Federation of Labor persists in legislating against Negro membership or in contriving equally as effective covert methods of exclusion.<sup>11</sup> Discrimination in the unions react as deleteriously upon the labor movement from an economic point of view as upon the Negro workers. Where Negroes are denied membership but are still able to ply their craft, the wage rate received by them is usually lower than the union wage scale. This means that the Negro usually works under open shop conditions and because of it threatens union standards and stability. On the other hand these conditions force them to observe a lower standard of living, the effects of which are registered in community maladjustment. It is because of the race hostility and economic disadvantage induced by union discrimination that the National Urban League has created a Department of Industrial Relations which aims to affect a reapproachment between the white and black workers under the leadership of the American Federation of Labor.

If racial attitudes prevent white and

<sup>11</sup> Vid. "The Negro and Economic Radicalism," Abram L. Harris, Jr., *The Modern Quarterly Magazine*, February, 1925. See, also, the *American Labor Year Book*, pages 54 and 69, Vol. V.

black workers from associating in trade unions, how great is the probability that they will unite in a political party for economic reform? Or, that by uttering a few Marxian epigrams, economic class consciousness will be awakened in white and black workers? The Negro may be continually admonished of being exploited by white capitalists, but experience and tradition, perhaps, lead him to wonder if working for a white employer at a wage slightly below that paid his white competitor is as great a handicap as ostracism or double-dealing by the union. His calculations are usually in favor of the employer.

The fortunate few among the Negro workers have escaped the wages system into self-employment through the establishment of race enterprises which oft-times have been successful. Others who have remained wage-earners accept unionism, if at all, hesitatingly or possibly with a crude pragmatism.

So insuperable has seemed the task of allaying the mutual suspicion of white and black workers that even radicals have lost most of their ardor for emancipating black "wage-slaves." This, however, is not true of the handful of Communists who constitute the Workers' Party of America and who believe that the Negro workers' recent advent into machine industry will inevitably mean his awakening to working-class consciousness.<sup>12</sup> An

<sup>12</sup> The Fourth Congress of the Third Internationale held in Moscow November 7 to December 3, 1922, resolved that "the international struggle of the Negro race is a struggle against capitalism and imperialism." The resolutions further stated that the Communist Internationale, "is not simply the organization of the enslaved white workers of Europe and America, but equally of the organization of the oppressed colored peoples of the world (and) will fight for race equality of the Negro with the white people, as well as for equal wages, and political and social rights (and) will use every in-

infinitesimal minority of black communist apostles are relied upon to proselyte the Negro workers for the class struggle.<sup>13</sup> It is very likely that the present attitude of white organized labor which, itself, is not class conscious, and the Negro's gradual emergence in the open shop from the ranks of unskilled labor into that of the skilled, may accentuate his individualism and thus shatter the communists' spectacular puerile forecasts. Like the *Messenger Magazine*,<sup>14</sup> the erstwhile mouthpiece of socialism among Negroes, the Communists too will ultimately retire from the field of radical propaganda. Upon gradually losing the support of white radicals, and realizing that as an organ of socialistic propaganda, it could not safely rely upon the Negro for constant support, the *Messenger* became a literary monthly. Whatever the editor's closet *welt-anschauung* may be, the *Messenger* is no longer the mouthpiece of "scientific radicalism." Where the magazine once carried the socialist emblem, "Workers of the World Unite," it now places a tribute to Negro business enterprise.

In spite of all that has been said, one should not be dogmatic about the future significance of the Negro's industrial advance to the organized labor movement.<sup>15</sup> As the migration of the black

strument within its control to compel the trade unions to admit Negro workers . . . (and) will take immediate steps to hold a general Negro conference or congress in Moscow," *American Labor Year Book*, Vol. V, page 311.

<sup>13</sup> Vid. "Aspirations of Educated Colored Leaders," Abram L. Harris, Jr., *Current History Magazine*, June, 1923.

<sup>14</sup> A socialist magazine published by Negroes. The Lusk Commission's Report on Radicalism in the United States called this publication the most dangerous of all Negro publications. Vid. The Lusk Commission's *Report on Radicalism*, Vol. II.

<sup>15</sup> Vid. "The Negro Migrations North," Abram L. Harris, Jr., *Current History Magazine*, September, 1924.

workers continues, bitter experience may teach organized labor the necessity of lowering its barriers so as to admit more of these workers. And as the Negro workers become more acclimated to the ways of capitalism—its waves of unemployment, the periodicity of industry, industrial hazards and the individual worker's insecurity—they may evince a keener desire to control some of the disabilities they suffer under the wages system. Collective bargaining and unionism may then be expected. But labor solidarity and independent political action are contingent upon a change in race attitudes and relationship. As reflected by the working masses this transformation will only follow in consequence of a revolution of opinion among enlightened black and white leaders.

#### LIBERALISM AND THE NEGRO

A growing race consciousness, both among the masses and the educated Negroes, is the matrix from which issues a quick resentment to real and imagined grievances. In extreme cases the proverbial "chip" is carried. Evidences of this awakened consciousness are the demands for Negro business enterprises, slogans of "patronize your own" and efforts to create in the Negro a deeper appreciation for his cultural contributions to Western civilization.

The Garvey movement, with its black Christs and Madonnas is symbolic of a color psychosis which may easily develop from an extreme racial positive-self-feeling. If the Negro's ever-increasing self-assertion is not guided by Negro intellectuals possessed of catholic vision, it will build within the present order a self-illuminating black world oblivious to things white. If guided by such leadership, his contributions to music, art and literature may exceed present calculations, or his alignment with

some phases of liberal thought may definitely be established. Such a task is more easily delegated to the Negro intellectual than accomplished by him. His education and balked ambitions render him more race conscious than the ignorant and disadvantaged Negro. Secluded in his room, a Negro intellectual may try to surpass Marx in determining how best to deliver the capitalist into the hands of the proletariat. When this same Negro enters his real world where he encounters the apathy of his own group and the hostility of the white, very likely he ponders the feasibility of the converse proposition. Without doubt many Negroes would be more inclined to an acceptance of radical and liberal doctrines were it not for these circumstances. Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois long ago recognized the quandary in which the intellectual Negro is placed by the race problem:

They must perpetually discuss the Negro problem, must live, move and have their being in it, and interpret all else in its light or darkness. From the double life that every American Negro must live as a Negro and as an American, as swept on by the current of the twentieth century while struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth—from this must arise a powerful self-consciousness and a moral hesitancy which is almost fatal to self-consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

As shown in the first part of the essay, race psychology thwarts comprehensive progressive political action and the growth of liberalism in America. The same force is now seen as an obstruction to universality of thought among Negroes. So absorbed is the Negro intellectual with the race problem that problems of labor, housing, taxation, judicial reform and war, all of which affect him, must needs be relegated to the limbo of minor significance. And the Negro who aspires to intellectual heights, but at the same time

<sup>16</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, page 202.

gives himself up to advocating remedial racial legislation, organizing equal rights leagues or proving that his race is not mentally inferior to the white—without becoming a propagandist or an inflated racialist—is put to his wit's end in an attempt to syncretize incongruous ideals.

Another deterrent to the advance of Negro liberalism is the race's religiosity. The harsh environment in which the Negro found himself as a slave made a normal expression of his social impulses impossible—his emotions were suppressed. Consequent upon his introduction to Christianity these pent-up emotions found a channel of expression. They were directed toward constructing sentiments around an otherworldly symbolism; and thus his world of despair was robbed of reality. What is often taken for an indigenous religious temperament on the Negro's part is in truth a mere compensatory or defense mechanism which persists because the complexes which gave rise to it have only been superficially disturbed. The success of religious leaders in holding the Negro steadfastly orthodox may be largely attributable to the latter's effort to escape reality. Thus this leadership, in administering to the Negro's spiritual needs, augments the psychic compensation derived from super-natural values. As such it is both cause and effect of orthodoxy. Under these conditions, advanced thinking, whether it brings religious skepticism, economic radicalism, social reform and re-adjustment, or the repudiation of hoary political traditions, must futilely run the gauntlet of religious orthodoxy, if it would gain audience. One would logically assume, in light of the Negro's years of persecution, that he would possess a highly developed sense of sympathy for the strivings of other submerged classes, and that his leaders would be more acutely imbued with a

sense of social justice. Sociologists are about agreed that a religious faith requires an uncritical belief in its doctrines and demands that these be placed above other truths as sacred eternal verities. According to Maurice Parmelee, "the attitude encouraged by science is such as to permit free intercourse without restriction between all parts of mankind, while the mental attitude not only encouraged but positively required by religion will always serve as a barrier to the most highly developed and most extensive form of humanitarianism."<sup>17</sup> This is as much applicable to the Negro as a social group as to any other. Therefore, the Negro who should take his place in the vanguard of liberalism, feeling unable to secure an audience or, what is worse, the assurance of income for maintenance, closets from public inspection whatever advanced views he holds.

In assigning causes for the Negro's social conservatism and lack of intellectual daring, pseudo-anthropologists have revitalized Gobineau's racial determinism. These racialists support their acceptance of this doctrine by creating categories of racial psychic endowment arising out of a difference in germ plasm due to environmental selection. Thus white man's civilization is to be attributed to the Nordic's restlessness and to his spirit of conquest and mental indefatigability. Similarly, docility, indifference to the future, non-purposiveness in thought, imitativeness and minstrelsy are designated negroid characteristics.<sup>18</sup> Although the present essay is not designed to refute the transmission of acquired traits or the notion that characteristics which have been conveniently, albeit speciously, labelled

<sup>17</sup> Maurice Parmelee, *Poverty and Social Progress*, page 239.

<sup>18</sup> Vid. G. S. Dow, *Society and Its Problems*, "The American Race Problem," Chapter IX, page 157-188.



racial, are due to inherent biologic factors, it questions the logic of attributing either the passive nature of the Negro's cultural development or his apathy to advanced thought to the determinism of biological traits selected under African environment.<sup>19</sup> This *à priori* argument, purporting to show the hereditary potency of an African environment in Negro life, is such worthless speculation as to be dismissed without serious comment. One need not go to far-removed Africa for an explanation of the aforementioned features of Negro intellectual growth. A much less doubtful source of information is to be found about us in the observable sociologic phenomena which we have attempted to analyze in this paper. From this analysis it does not appear that the absence of intellectual aggressiveness and

universalism are the result of non-purposiveness in thought stunned by gratuitous African life, but a reflex of the social forces of the environment in which the Negro has lived almost three centuries. It does not seem to be inferior mind stuff which renders him apathetic to liberal social movements, but a circumstance of race which demands him to think 'black.' Buttrressing these walls of race division are competition between white and black workers; American individualism and the Negro's belief in it; the Negro's religious orthodoxy and his quickened sense of injury and resentment to it. Here then are social forces which create black and white worlds in American society and which are more fatal to the growth of working class consciousness and the Negro's intellectual achievement and emancipation than is all the alleged influence of the environment in which his forbears lived prior to their enslavement by white Americans.

<sup>19</sup> Vid. A critique by Abram L. Harris, Jr., of the above work: "Defining the Race Problem," *Oppportunity*, January, 1925.

## GUIDES TO PERIODICAL READING

GEORGE B. LOGAN

"The Color Line" in America is an arbitrary distinction set up on a basis of skin pigmentation, with minor emphasis shape of lips or nose and form of hair. A man is officially a Negro if he has a single drop of African blood in his veins, and practically one if he bears the physical marks that are popularly supposed to denote African descent. As Melville J. Herskovits points out in the October *American Mercury*, the distinction has become social rather than biological, since a large minority of so-called Negroes are ethnically more white than black, and the color line is "passed" far oftener than most of us realize. Very few are of pure

blood, and there is every conceivable percentage of mixture among them. It would be well for us to see that the problem they raise is sociological and only in small degree racial.

A highly adaptable yet proud people, the Germans have made themselves thoroughly at home in this country while still retaining their own language, customs, and love for the fatherland. Since Penn first invited the Mennonites to Philadelphia, they have spread by the million over the East and Middle West, contributing to our national culture in music, the theatre, and the schools, and filling