

THE CONFLICT OF CASTE AND CLASS IN AN AMERICAN INDUSTRY

CHARLES S. JOHNSON

ABSTRACT

Negro labor made its earliest significant shift from field to factory in the first notable industry in the South, the manufacture of tobacco. The Negro eagerly sought employment in the industry and throughout the period of slavery held high a monopoly of tobacco work establishing a fixed association of Negroes and tobacco. With each advance in machinery there has been an increase in white male and female labor, and Negro workers have held only those jobs secured to them by low wages, disagreeable dust, and by tasks regarded as too heavy for native-born white Americans. The Negro worker is by tradition to "stay in his place," but his place is being continually narrowed. The race tradition with its ritual of segregation, regarded by white workers as natural and by the Negro workers as traditional, is used by the industry to keep the two groups actively and impotently in conflict. The present working relation of constant bickering and confusion does not present a solid labor front competent to bargain with capital.

Tobacco holds a unique place in American history. It was the first commercial staple crop of any consequence, and its manufacture became the first notable industry in the South. It helped to shape the social as well as the economic institutions of the colony of Virginia and, through the export trade with England, ultimately supplied an economic basis for American independence itself. Despite its ultimate value as a commercial crop, tobacco production would have scarcely had the economic importance it so early gained without the slave labor which multiplied its profits. Thus began an early and significant association of Negro labor with the commodity, which extended from cultivation of the plant, through the stages of leaf preparation, to the manufacture of the finished commodity.

Just as free labor drove out slavery in Pennsylvania, where there was no such suitable commercial staple, slavery drove out free and indentured labor in Virginia, where a staple crop flourished. The tobacco factories in Richmond, Petersburg, and Lynchburg early became commercial institutions of no little importance in the life of the state and of the region. An interesting feature of these early industries was the transfer of Negro labor from field to factory. Negro labor, slave and free, performed a large share of the manufacturing work.

One of the effects of slavery was to leave the Negro at emancipation with a more or less complete monopoly of certain types of labor. Some of these were trades requiring a very considerable degree of skill. Certain tasks which had been customarily performed by Negroes during slavery were regarded, after slavery had been abolished, as Negro jobs which no white man could perform without some loss of caste.

The effect of slavery was to attach a social stigma to almost any kind of manual labor, but especially that which required patient submission to a fixed routine, and to the arbitrary control of the overseer or his successor, the boss.

If the stigma of slave work provided a certain protection to Negro workers against the competition of free white labor, tobacco manufacturing differed from other kinds of slave work in so far as it afforded the Negroes engaged in it some social distinction, and some opportunities they did not have elsewhere. It differed from plantation work in being an urban industry, and in being in immediate dependence upon a money economy. Leased slaves earned a weekly wage, even though they could not appropriate it. Free Negroes found in it one uncontested source of income, and slaves, by overtime work and wages, could at times purchase their own freedom. Lott Carey, the Negro missionary who distinguished himself in the Liberian colonization movement, purchased himself and his wife in this manner. The widely known Negro minister, John Jasper, who antedated Voliva in his fervent conviction that the sun revolved about the earth, was converted in a tobacco factory.

The story of John Jasper, who grew up before the Civil War, throws a great deal of light upon the character of the relations in the factories in this earlier period. He was a stemmer and, in his own words, could outstem any hand in the place. At his bench one day, after weeks of brooding, he became hysterical with religious emotion. The foreman, who was one of the poor white class, was unsympathetic. The owner, on the other hand, whom he called "Mars Sam," although more his employer than his owner, was an ardent Baptist, and was deeply moved by Jasper's conversion and, weeping with him, gave him a holiday to communicate his fervor to anyone else who would listen.

The cold and not infrequently hostile relations between the Negro

and the propertyless white class had, characteristically, its offset in the white propertied group in this industry, and the relations between white proprietor and the Negro laborer were comparable to the familiar relations of domestic slave and master. Indeed, during the early history of the industry Negroes were on a more comfortable basis with the owners than with the white workers, because they were actually a part of the owners' capital. Free white workers were in competition with the owners for a share of this wealth. This fact is significant because it is an incident of the long, though silent, competition of Negro labor, under the institution of slavery, with free white labor. The occupational restriction which slavery and caste imposed upon the Negro tended to give work in tobacco a special dignity. Negroes sought this occupation, and in it they were free to rise, within limits. It was an occupation which their children inherited. Habits of life were more or less adjusted to the demands of the industry. Moreover, in this work they had some sort of vested interest.

Throughout the period of slavery the Negro workers held high monopoly of the tobacco work, even though only a comparatively few received personal profit from it. So well established had this association been that it survived, only slightly altered, for many years after the legal status of the Negro laborer had changed with the transition from slavery to freedom. Hogshead-handlers, prizers, pickers, searchers, and stemmers remain today almost exclusively Negroes. Before the industry had gained its present rational organization and technical complexity, there were other hand processes besides stemming, involving a certain amount of skill, which were performed by Negroes. Under these conditions exceptional dexterity brought them a higher wage than any other industry was capable of yielding. In 1860, for example, tobacco factories in Petersburg and Richmond, Virginia, paid leased or free Negro laborers about \$225 a year in addition to their keep. In fact, one Negro worker is reported to have earned as much as \$900 in a single year. Twenty years after the close of the war certain classes of Negro workers in the factories were receiving from \$9.00 to \$14.50 a week—amounts exceeding the level of Negro earnings in industry today under conditions of open competition.

Considering its unique history, the tobacco industry offers a pecu-

liarily interesting illustration of the character assumed by the class struggle when complicated by racial antagonisms and caste tradition. A class struggle is implicit in the free competition on which capitalism and the capitalistic organization of industry is based. But in the early period of the tobacco industry the classes had all the features and limitations of a caste. New conditions inherent in the industry itself, and changes in the formal status of the Negro workers, have created conditions under which typical economic classes have developed and are now seeking to function. In the tobacco manufacturing industry, with its white and Negro workers, the class alignment, because of the persistence of the caste tradition, has been imperfectly achieved. Social habits and customs change less rapidly than artifacts and the division of labor incidental to the expansion of industry.

A modern industry is too complex and changes too rapidly to sustain a caste system. The progressive substitution of machinery for hand processes has created new tasks and destroyed old and honorable skills. With each advance in machinery there has been an increase in white male and female labor. Lacking the protection of that caste sentiment which preserved to the Negro jobs in which he once seemed to have some sort of vested interest, these workers have found themselves holding only those jobs which were "secured" to them by low wages, disagreeable dust, and by tasks regarded as too heavy for native-born white Americans.

Curiously enough, the existing racial division in work is rationalized by both white and Negro workers in essentially the same terms. A white worker who had come into one of the factory towns some years before from farm labor explained the racial division of labor as something having a biological basis. He said: "The niggers handle the dirty work. A white man couldn't get in there. The niggers always done the heavy, hot work. They stand it better."

In like manner, a Negro prizer, doing heavy work, assumed that these jobs fell to Negroes because they alone could sustain them. He said: "The white men work alongside of us, but they do the light and we do the heavy work. They couldn't do the kind of work we do. We go carrying around iron racks weighing from ninety pounds up. That would kill the whites."

But this same man was confused by reports of a different situation in a region which, incidentally, lacked the race and caste tradition of the Old South. He said: "They tell me that the white man does the prized work in St. Louis, where they work all whites, but these kinds of whites couldn't stand this work. No, Sir!"

If the exigencies of the economic system have given Negroes and whites the common interests of members of the same economic class, traditions supported by the familiar racial fictions and enforced by racial etiquette have continued to maintain the moral isolation of the races. It is the undercurrent of hostility which this isolation of the two groups inevitably fosters and the festering suspicions, which are more or less justified by the use which can be made of this internal conflict by the industry itself, that keep these two groups actively and impotently in conflict.

One of the most widespread expressions of prevailing racial attitudes is racial segregation. Segregation, even enforced by distinctions that are little more than symbolic, is regarded as of vital importance to the normal equilibrium, and, generally, to the best interests of both races. The traditional racial sentiments are shared fully and felt deeply by the workers, and especially by the white workers, who regard the practice of segregation as essential not merely to their own economic security but also to their racial and social status. The Negro workers, more or less resigned to their station, seek for themselves whatever security they can gain from a less exacting wage scale, from the uncomplaining performance of disagreeable tasks, from the moral support which casual personal relations with employers afford them, and from occasional benevolent sentiments of the more influential elements of the white population. The significance of this triangular relationship between the Negro, the employer group, and the white-worker group occasionally finds expression in embittered comment like that of a white worker who accused one firm of favoring Negroes. He said: "They like the nigger better, pay him less, treat him worse, kick and cuss him around, and the nigger'll take it."

In carrying out the traditional racial policy segregation of workers is practiced in most of the plants, but the form varies widely between plants, according to circumstances. The most common and wide-

spread form is the natural one, which follows the racial division of occupations. As noted earlier, the Negroes perform most of the work up to the point of manufacture and the white workers most of the work from fabrication to the market. That this occupational segregation is more a matter of caste and custom than of skill and capacity is indicated by the fact that there are numbers of white stemmers, traditionally a Negro's job, in Louisville, and of Negro making-machine operators, ordinarily a white man's job, in Winston-Salem and other cities.

All the supervisory posts are held by white workers, except in one notable instance in Louisville, where there are Negro foreman over Negro workers. White workers hold practically all the jobs in the plants classified as standard crafts. Negroes hold practically all the jobs regarded as menial, such as general-labor, porters', and cleaners' jobs.

A variety of types of physical segregation exists. In some instances—as, for example, in many of the Richmond plants—there are entirely separate buildings for the different races. In Winston-Salem, Durham, and Reidsville segregation is effected by separation, allocation of Negro and white workers to different workrooms, even when the occupational tasks are not different; sometimes by assignment of these groups to separate sides of the same room, and even by separate rows in the same room. The principle of racial separation is preserved in plants in at least two cities by day and night shifts. In that case a white and a Negro group do the same work on the same machines but are employed on different shifts. In one instance the Negro workers had the preferred shift.

Not all processes adjust themselves easily to strict racial separation. While broad occupational divisions are possible, there are yet other kinds of work with divergent requirements, for parts of which Negroes prove more useful. For example, on one plant on the same machines Negroes sacked while whites booked, and at another Negroes tagged while whites changed the knives, and in still another plant Negroes were hopper-feeders on machines operated by white men. When a heavy and a light task, or a pleasant and a disagreeable task, are combined, there may be racial segregation of the tasks without spatial separation.

There are conditions under which spatial segregation is not feasible, as when two connected processes are so close that they must be performed in the same room. A single Negro may be given a machine at the end of a room in which all other operators are white. Or, again, in one case noted the spirit of segregation may be appeased by providing separate doors to the same workroom.

It is interesting to note that, although practically many forms of segregation are employed, in every case the particular form in use at a time and place is regarded by white workers as part of the natural order, and by the Negro workers as traditional and unalterable. Race relations in the plant rest with a certain finality upon the customary basis, whatever it may be. Moreover, on certain types of segregated work the rationalizations in terms of special racial abilities and instincts are made and adopted by the workers themselves, although these assumptions are frequently not in accord with the facts. A white worker in Richmond expressed the opinion that it would cause a race war if a Negro were put on a machine, but there are actually not only in Richmond but in the other cities covered by a recent investigation some Negroes on machines.

To preserve proper relations it is deemed most important to the white workers that Negro workers "keep their place." This refers not merely to the Negro's place in the occupational hierarchy but to the necessity of maintaining the social and ceremonial distance between which local custom prescribes. At a Durham plant a white worker objected to the fact that white and Negro packers worked together on the same task: "You see, the southern man knows how to get along with the niggers. If they don't stay in their place you take a club and kill 'em. Of course they shouldn't work together in this way."

Another white worker, a union member, further revealed the caste motive in the present racial attitude of some white workers when he said: "I wouldn't work with niggers on the same kind of work. I don't think a nigger ought to make as much as a white man. It just won't do. Give a nigger a little money and he's a 'big Ike' right then. He'd want to come to the same cafés you do. You can't reason with a nigger when he's got a little bit of money in his pocket."

Far from the ideal of a solid labor front competent to bargain with

capital, the present working relation is one of constant bickering, flux, and confusion. The more highly developed the establishment, the more complex the race relations, because of the difficulty of enforcing the racial etiquette in each new situation created by internal physical adjustments. In the smaller and industrially less elaborated establishments racial sentiments are less disturbed by technological and organizational changes.

In one plant, for example, there is a white night shift and a Negro day shift working on the same machines. The white workers wanted the day shift and the Negroes wanted the white pay rates. In another plant three white girls were displaced by Negroes. In one plant the white workers were certain that a riot would result if Negroes were ever put on machine work. In an adjoining plant they were on machines, and under another company nearly a hundred Negroes were placed on machines without an outbreak. In this case it was said all the workers were afraid of the foreman. The Negroes have, in some instances, complained about "poor whites" from the country, willing to begin at less than even the Negro scale of pay. The white workers, in another instance, complained that an old "fogy" superintendent "wouldn't give the white boys a break."

Effective labor organization is, under the circumstances, impossible. Negroes heartily distrust the white union members, and not without reason. The white workers distrust the Negro's understanding of union principles, and his disposition to submit to union discipline. What is more important, they are unwilling to have Negro workers receive the same pay for the same kind of work. As one of them put it: "Give a nigger the same money, and he gets uppity; he'll want to come in a café and eat with you."

The closest approach to traditional union policy that the white unionists were willing to concede was separate closed shops. This is another expression of the policy of separate unions. The comment of a white worker on this proposal was: "They never will get as much as us though. The Company couldn't afford that." However, during the worst year of the depression the company was able to pay dividends of over \$1,500 per worker over the average of \$600 which the workers earned in wages.¹

¹ This wide discrepancy between the annual wage of the workers and the annual

Just as there are many forms of segregation maintained without protest, so there are instances of the absence of it, similarly without evidence of difficulty. In Winston-Salem there are divisions of plants in which whites and Negroes work side by side as pickers, cappers, machine operators, and stemmers. Again, during the Christmas rush, it is customary to have groups work together. Recent readjustments during the past year have prompted compression or reorganization of tasks, resulting in the breaking-down of the racial alignment. Where a particularly strong foreman wills it, the arrangement is set in either direction, and none of these arrangements appears to have provoked any abnormal situation. Two significant comments are noted on this modification of traditional policy. Said a worker in one of the Winston-Salem plants: "The poor whites and niggers is worked together up at No. ———. They is using the poor whites to whip the nigger and the nigger to whip the poor whites. If the poor whites sort of get out of line, they fire them and put niggers in their jobs, and they do the niggers the same way." The observation by a Negro worker was to the effect that they are all "hard off and can't complain."

In one plant there has been an instance of the displacement of a white by a Negro gang, and in two other plants the shifting upward of a Negro to a more skilled task alongside white workers, without changing the designation of his task or his pay.

One situation making for tolerance of a non-segregated working arrangement is the present work shortage, which, however, results frequently in the displacement of Negro workers. Types of work long regarded as "Negro jobs" are being increasingly sought by white workers, and these workers not only make no objection but seek apprentice opportunities among Negro workers. This is very pro-

profit of the industry per wage-earner suggests a question which has been often asked but never satisfactorily answered. It is this: Was the Negro laborer better off in slavery than he is today in freedom? As far as concerns the tobacco industry, it is possible to make some sort of answer. Slavery, in any case, gave the Negro a security he does not possess today. It is probable that the capital investment of the manufacturer, even where he owned his own laborers, was not as great in proportion to the number of laborers employed as it is today. However, the laborer's share in the earnings of the industry, small as it may have been, was probably greater, proportionately, before emancipation than it is today.

nounced in Louisville, where a Negro, commenting upon the appearance of a newly mixed gang, said: "No white man did my kind of work till lately. They just like us, kinda poor and they want to stay. They all want to keep a job here now and they's all right. The other superintendent didn't let white men come down on our gang, but this one does. He's from South Carolina. Sometime they send white men down to work on our gang when they ain't nothing doing much on another floor."

There are at least three angles to the problem of what jobs Negroes should have and what jobs the whites should have. (1) There is the angle of the Negroes who need the jobs they have always had as a livelihood. (2) There is the angle of the whites who, unemployed at former occupations, seek jobs in the tobacco industry. (3) There is the employer's angle of least cost.

In the first case the principle of seniority and the development of skills would allow for continued employment of Negroes in old jobs. As new jobs developed, Negroes and whites would be employed according to their several abilities to acquire the new skills. This would mean that where, for instance, all stemmers had been Negroes, these Negroes would be retained as stemmers with Negro replacements. When a change in the industry developed a new job, Negroes would have equal opportunity to qualify and fill the new jobs with whites. This first angle is given the least consideration of any.

In the second case there are numerous white workers who formerly were occupied in other jobs, but who are now unemployed and seek tobacco jobs—in fact, any they can get. Jobs have been classified traditionally in a loose manner, according to respectability, as Negro jobs and white jobs. There remains a tendency to stick to this traditional division, but the pressure of circumstances has continually lowered the lower margin of respectability. Whereas twenty years ago work in a tobacco factory was considered degrading to a white person, unless employed in a supervisory or similar capacity, there are now white women stemmers. Such occupations remained for a long time exclusively Negro tasks.

With the coming of cigarettes and machine processes, new jobs, or at least different jobs, were created. Although in many cases the jobs are not much different as regards respectability, sanitary condi-

tions, hours, and facilities, the fact that these are new allows them to be classed as white jobs, from which Negro workers may be excluded.

There is not much difference between stemming and searching in this respect. Yet, in one large plant, all stemmers are Negroes and all searchers are white. The only difference is a margin of status in case of the searchers. Searching follows stemming, and the searchers can check on the stemmers rather than be checked on by the stemmers. This, now, permits it to be classed as a white job. In most places all machine operators and cigarette makers are white. In many cases where the conception of what constitutes a Negro job has been strictly construed, Negro jobs have been reduced to that of janitor, or limited to such heavy work as handling hogsheads. The Negro worker is by tradition to stay in his place, but his place is being continually restricted.

The third angle is that of the employer who is inevitably constrained by the necessity of getting the most work done at least cost. Another race differential complicates his problem. Whatever a Negro earns at a given job, a white worker, according to the prevailing custom, should get more. Whatever the general standard of living of the Negroes is, that of the white workers is expected to be higher. There is in the end no real reason why the employer should pay more wages to white workers when he can get the same work done by Negroes at a lower labor cost. He is, nevertheless, continually faced with the pressure of white workers for jobs, and these workers insist that Negroes be paid less.

FISK UNIVERSITY