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THE NEGRO

❁ PROBLEM ❁



*A Sociological Treatment*



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BY R. R. WRIGHT, JR.



# THE NEGRO

  

# PROBLEM



Being extracts from two lectures on  
"The Sociological Point Of View In  
The Study Of Race Problems," and  
"The Negro Problem; What It Is  
Not, And What It Is \* \* \* \*



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## FOREWORD.

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The following papers were prepared for the Social Study Class at the University of Pennsylvania, and partly published by the "Public Ledger," of Philadelphia, and a number of other publications. The first part tells of the attitude which social students ought to have in the study of race problems, and the difficulties involved; the second portion is an analysis of the Negro problem, which, when first published, attracted considerable attention. This is presented in this form chiefly for the criticism of the reader; and no one will welcome this criticism any more than

THE AUTHOR.

November, 1911.





## THE SOCIOLOGICAL ATTITUDE IN THE STUDY OF NEGRO PROBLEMS.

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I have been asked to speak on the Negro Problem. What, may I ask, should be the proper attitude of the social student toward this so-called Negro Problem? Before we go into any analysis of the same, it is necessary that we should carefully consider some of the fundamental principles of the science of sociology as it bears upon our study of race.



### Fundamental Principles.

Sociology is the last of the great sciences. It is only a little more than a generation old, and, as yet, its principles are not quite definite. So that among any

large number of people who call themselves sociologists, one might find as many shades of opinion as he would among the large number of persons who call themselves Christians. Unlike biology, or astronomy, or mathematics, there is as yet no definite set of fundamental principles upon which all sociologists agree. The difficulty which Mr. Herbert Spencer has pointed out in his excellent treatise on the Study of Sociology, is that sociology deals with human activity, which presents many difficulties of interpretation. The opponents of the science have said that no such science could exist, because human action could never be foretold on account of the operation of the element of the free will. Man's will being free, it is argued, means that man's actions are determined more by desire, whim, impulse and caprice, than by law.

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While certain causes will produce certain results when all the factors are purely physical, it may be different when the human will enters, for the same stimuli may produce very different results. What makes one man laugh, may cause another to cry; what affects one man one way to-day, may affect him differently to-morrow, and still differently the next day. An iron ball let loose at the top of a hill will follow the line of least resistance, till it reaches the bottom of the hill, unless stopped by some outside force. Here the law of gravitation has full play. And not only will one iron ball, but every iron ball, and every wooden ball, or stone ball, will show, approximately, the same influence of gravitation. But a man may start down hill, in fact, be pushed down, but he may go only half way and turn back, or turn to the left, or to the right, or stop

still because of no outside influence, and only because of his will, his own desire. Hence, the difficulty in judging men's actions. Hence, the impossibility of a science of human activity.

Furthermore, there is great difficulty in judging human action in order to get material for social law, if such were possible. In human action, as no where else, men are influenced by personal or social point of view. If the man is a Jew, all things appear to him from the Jewish point of view; if he is a lawyer, he has a legal bias (as Mr. Spencer calls it), or if he is a rich man, he will have the bias of the wealthy. Take any set of phenomena, there will be as many different opinions as there are different biases, each firmly held to be the correct opinion or point of view. But all serious students agree that it is this very bias which makes a study worthless from

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a strictly, scientific point of view, for until we can get out of our personal feelings, we cannot be said to have achieved anything which is scientific.



**The Scientific Point of View is Impersonal.**

The sociologist, to be scientific, should attempt at least to approach human phenomena in just the same spirit as the biologist would approach phenomena of life. The questions of race, or social relations, or of government, or family, or of labor and capital, must be treated by the sociologist as no more his personal concern than is a piece of dirt to the geologist, or a flower to the botanist, or a snake the personal concern of the zoologist. No botanist would be turned from his careful study of flowers because the roses

grew in his yard, or because they were his wife's favorite flowers. No geologist would be expected to pay more personal attention to geological conditions in his native country than in his enemy's country, and when he examines them the question of personal likes and dislikes has absolutely nothing to do with it. The chemical analysis of materials is a thing entirely apart from the possession of these materials by any individual, or from any preference which the chemist may have. If he is examining the blood of a millionaire or a king, he is no more influenced than if he is examining the blood of a criminal. The point of view of science is entirely impersonal. One of the best illustrations of this is in the case of President Ira Remsen, of Johns Hopkins University. He discovered saccharin, a substance many times sweeter and cheaper

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than sugar, which was used as a substitute for sugar. On this hung most of Remsen's reputation as a chemist and benefactor of humanity; but when later study showed that saccharin was injurious to the digestive organs, he, a true scientist, did not hesitate to disapprove its use in foods. There is no such thing as passion or anger in science. There is no such thing as sentimental approval or disapproval in science. Facts, and facts alone, count in science. The scientist's business is to find out what the facts are, not to make them; to find out the course of evolution and not to direct that course.

Now, until we can approach facts of social life in such a spirit, we cannot be said to have a science of sociology. A sociologist who is black ought not to have a different point of view from that of one who is white. He is not interested in



proving any superiority of his race or of any other race. Whatever the facts show, that the sociologist grasps. Applied sociology has been likened to applied medicine. We would not expect a physician, if his child had tuberculosis, to treat it for a pain in the arm, but to treat it for tuberculosis. There are diseases which point to immorality, and yet he would be an unprofessional physician, who, after diagnosing the case, would treat a man for catarrh, where it was clear that he had syphilis, or some other disease of that class. The physician must be guided by facts, not good wishes, nor the feelings of his patients, no matter how rich or learned and influential or how poor and despised they are.

It would be clearly as unprofessional for the sociologist to pander to the preju-

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dices of his community merely for money, or popular applause, or because he has not the moral courage to withstand them. as it would be for the physician. The scientist is the man of knowledge, and he should not be led by the ignorance of the mob.



### **Impersonal Point of View Must Be Contended For.**

The stand which the sociologist must take to-day is not new, and he must not be surprised if his community is slow to hear real facts. One of the most impersonal of the sciences is astronomy. No man thinks of putting his personal feelings into the study of the stars. But the science of astronomy had to contend for centuries in order to gain this impersonal

point of view. It not only had to fight the ignorance of the rabble, but the learning of the pseudo learned. It first had to fight the church, the most powerful organization in the world at that time. And this was its greatest enemy. Most people who claim to be religious and to be led by their consciences, feel that conscience is somehow the voice of God, and whatever their conscience approves is unquestionably right. Many, therefore, have been willing to die for their consciences' sake. So, a thousand years ago, when men read in the Bible about the four corners of the earth, they were sure that the earth was flat, with four corners. Any one who wrote or spoke against this point of view, was considered by the general public both ignorant of the state of things and unfaithful to religion.

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**Astronomy's Contention for the Impersonal Point of View.**

When Copernicus asserted that the earth was not the center of the universe, that it was merely a small part of a great system which moved around the sun, which was the center, he did not have the support of public opinion. Many thought he was mad; that his mind was unbalanced. Did not the Bible speak of the sun rising and setting, and did not we see it move over the earth, from East to West? Do we not know that the earth is not moving? For if it were, how could we stand on it? Did not Joshua command the sun to stop in its course around the earth? Thus Holy Writ was brought in to substantiate the popular view against the scientist. Copernicus was treated as an infidel, and in those days when the Church ruled the sciences, as well as the

conscience, Copernicus' books were burned and he was silenced. A few years later there came Galileo, who had about the same experience. He claimed to have made discoveries which the popular mind did not believe, and he was forced to deny what he had scientifically discovered, in order to escape popular prejudice and persecution. Such was the case also of Keplar, who was brought before the Church Council and made to take back what he had publicly stated, and which, of course, we now know to be true. We look back at that day and pity the poor people's consciences, which made them do unreasonable things, and it is sufficient evidence to say that conscience in the scientific matters indicated was not God's voice. Astronomy, by following the facts rather than the whims of men, has won the day.

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**Geography Had Also To Contend.**

The first geographers and astronomers who claimed that the earth was round were brought up before church councils and were made to attempt to prove their contention by the Bible, and were disgraced when they stated to the world that the earth was round. Even as late as the time of Christopher Columbus, the geographer was not free from public censure. He was persecuted because he declared that the western part of the world could be reached by sailing east. He was crazy, so the great mass of people thought, because he did not adhere to popular opinion, but time has proved him wiser than the mob, and posterity calls him one of the makers of geography, and we honor him as a benefactor of the world. To-day we laugh at the man who says that the earth is flat, or that he sees

the sun rise and set, and who talks literally, about the four corners of the earth. We have, of course, changed our view of the Bible and our consciences as well have changed to suit our science. But this never would have been had scientists not contended for consideration of facts, and facts alone.

The geologist has also had to fight his way for the impersonal point of view. There are men living to-day who have called the geologist the worst of infidels. Do not the tradition and the Bible say, if we take their interpretation, that Hell is a burning lake, and do they not make the Bible locate it in the bowels of the earth? When the geologist explains his view of the earth, making no place for a Hell within, and declares that this earth is only eight thousand miles through, he was promptly branded as an infidel by

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those who judged by their prejudice and their consciences, rather than by the facts. Similarly when the geologist said this earth was hundreds of thousands of years of age, men whose opinions were not based upon a study of facts, gave the geologist all kinds of abuse. But to-day, we accept complacently, practically everything which the geologist claimed in this regard. And so the botanist and the zoologist and the biologist.



### **Biology vs. Popular Prejudice.**

The biologist is just now fighting his battle and just now winning. We remember, when a small boy, how sinful it was said to be, even to read the books of Darwin and Herbert Spencer and Huxley, Tyndall and other advocates of the



theory of evolution. They claimed that the present state of the earth was an evolution, that various forms of life had evolved from other forms, and that the probability was that we all came from a lower form, and have been thousands and thousands of years evolving. Popular prejudice was at once aroused, and pious ministers felt called upon to preach sermons against evolution. To be called an evolutionist was equivalent to being called an infidel. Men were turned out of the church for espousing the cause of evolution. Earnest preachers resigned their pulpits when they became "converted" to evolution. To-day, very few intelligent, well-trained ministers object to evolution, but in the back woods, where intelligence has not yet penetrated, they are still fighting against evolution, believing they are fighting the battle of con-

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science and of religion. But the contest has gone far enough to assure us practically that the biologist will win his point of view, and the man whose only information is traditional, though he even use his conscience to uphold his prejudice, will go down before the biologist as he always has gone down before the astronomer and zoologist, under the convincing weight of scientific facts. The scientist must, therefore, never fear to combat human prejudice.



### **Sociology's Task.**

Sociology is just now beginning the fight, and I have reviewed these matters of history to show that we must fight if we are going to establish a science. We have human prejudice to fight, we have

the consciences of the uninformed to fight; their bias, Mr. Spencer would call it. Does not the Bible say for example, that Ham was cursed, and do not millions of Christians believe that the reason of the oppression of black people is because God cursed them through Ham? Did Jehovah not say, "Servant of servants shalt thou be," etc., and did not the black man bear the cross of Jesus Christ, showing that even the Founder of Christianity put upon Negroes the "curse" of doing the hard work? It is difficult for us, human beings as we are, to overcome this prejudice, but the history of science shows that until we combat it and with facts, beat it down, as have the astronomers, the geographers, the geologists, the biologists and others, we can never hope to establish firmly the right of sociology to stand as one of the great sciences.

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Now, you see the position in which I am. As one who believes a science of sociology is a possibility, and who humbly takes to himself the name of a student of sociology, I find myself in the quandry; shall I be true to the facts without regard to my personal feelings or to yours; without regard to your prejudices or your consciences or your tradition, or shall I stand before you and tell you what you want to hear, to please you? Shall I pander to you, or shall I have the courage of a Galileo, or a Keplar, or Spencer, or a Huxley, and go away from here with your disapproval, rather than with your applause, because I do not give you the things which uphold your prejudices? As a would-be scientist, there is but one thing which I can do and that is to give you the facts as they are.

### Study of Race Problems.

In the study of the facts of human activity, the very condition of scientific value must be the accuracy and impartiality of the observation of students. For accurate observation the student must be tolerant and open-minded. He must be widely acquainted with the history and condition of peoples in the different parts of the world, that he shall be entirely rid of his national, sectional, racial, religious and political bias. In spite of his race and religion and early education he ought to be able to look upon the facts of society entirely from the impersonal point of view.

This is especially necessary in the study of nationalities and races different from our own. We are very liable to underrate these peoples, to consider their mental and physical differences as men-

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tal and physical inferiorities; to call their religion heathen, to look upon their racial tendencies as downward if they are not as ours. This will give us a provincial philosophy, but nothing of real scientific value.

[We are especially apt to be led by the prejudice of our environment in studying a hostile race, one with whom we have lately had war, or a race our environment considers inferior, a recently enslaved race. And here is our difficulty in studying the Negro and his problems.



### **THE NEGRO PROBLEM IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM.**

In what consists the particular and peculiar Negro race problem of which we hear so much?

A social problem may be said to exist

with reference to any particular group, when there is in any way maladjustment of that group with respect to its environment. Then, the Negro problem must be a social problem of maladjustment between the Negro group and its American environment. A social problem is a Negro problem in so far as the social maladjustment is first, common to the great mass of the Negro group, and second, peculiar to it. It is not a Negro problem if the maladjustment is not **common** to the entire Negro group, that is, **all** Negroes suffer it; or, it is not **peculiar** to the Negro group, that is, **only** Negroes suffer it. This, we must get clearly in our minds if we are to understand the problem of the Negro.

**What The Negro Problem Is Not.**

Much confusion already prevails as to just what this maladjustment is, and to avoid further confusion careful analysis is necessary. The average man with whom I have come in contact, identifies in some way, the Negro problem with the problem of ignorance and vice, or with poverty and immorality, or with industrial inefficiency, unemployment or some other pathological social conditions.

One says, if it were not for the ignorance of the Negro, there would be no problem. But let us examine this and we will see that the Negro problem is not a problem of illiteracy or ignorance. In the first place, illiteracy is not common to the Negro race, for the majority of them can read and write. In the second place, illiteracy is not peculiar to them as a race, for there are more white illiterates in this



country than Negro illiterates. In 1900 the census gave 3,200,069 as the number of white illiterates, and 2,853,194 as the number of Negro illiterates in the country. There are, according to the same census, fourteen times as many white illiterates in the State of Pennsylvania as Negro illiterates, while by the same authority in proportion to population, there is less illiteracy among the younger generation of Negroes living in the North, than in the same class of whites living in the South. The throngs which come to our great cities have a great deal more ignorance among the foreign white element than among the Negroes. It is plain, therefore, that ignorance and illiteracy are not the Negro problem, although many Negroes, as well as many whites, are involved in the general problem of ignorance, which has no color whatever.

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### Not a Question of Poverty

Nor is the Negro problem to be identified with the poverty problems for all the Negroes are not poor, nor are they a large proportion of the poor among them. To refer again to the census, the special report on "Paupers in Almshouses" shows that there were on December 31, 1903, 81,764 paupers in the almshouses of the country; 74,854 were white and 6,910 colored, including Chinese and Indians. Indeed, of the foreign whites the proportion was more than four times as great as that of the Negroes, according to the population of each group. Poverty is a condition of a gradually decreasing group of Negroes, but is not the group's peculiar problem. Like ignorance, poverty has no color. A visit to the slums of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia or New Orleans will convince the dullest mind that the

problem of poverty and the Negro problem are not one and the same.

Nor is the Negro problem one of crime. In the city of Philadelphia, where I have gone over the police records and reports very carefully, I find that the Negro criminal class is but a small fraction of the whole group of Negroes, the great mass being law-abiding and respectable working men and women. By the best figures available there are probably fifteen white persons in the criminal class to every criminal Negro. Nor is general depravity, immorality, the Negro's peculiar problem. I might go through a whole list of things which superficial people call the Negro problem, but that is unnecessary if you appreciate the principle involved.

I do not mean to say that these pathological conditions are not real among the

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Negro race as among the whites, for such an assertion would be untrue, but I do mean to impress that it is confused thinking which identifies the Negro problem with any of the above-mentioned problems, and that such confusion leads to serious error and an indefinite postponement of any solution, or harmonious adjustment of racial relations.

By way of illustration, let us suppose that when we should awake to-morrow morning we should find that all possible means of identifying the Negroes had disappeared and we could not tell them from other men, but that they still remained the same in character and ability. It is clear that we should have no more Negro problem, but it is not clear that we should not have just as the day before, various problems of crime, poverty, ignorance, immorality, etc. We should then

be convinced that these problems, which still exist, are not the Negro problem. .



### What the Problem Is.

What, then, is the Negro problem? What maladjustment is at the same time common to the Negro group as a whole, and peculiar to it as over against the white group? Sociology, whose field of study is the social mind, so to speak, furnishes the ready answer, after a careful analysis of the condition. That answer is that the Negro problem is in the attitude of the American public mind toward the Negro race, an attitude which insists upon separating the Negro group from the general group, and labeling the Negro according to his color alone without regard to his character. It is this at-

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titude which continually seeks and exaggerates imaginary "race differences," and is anxious about "the place of the Negro," not allowing the Negro to find his own level or place as other men do. It makes race, rather than character and efficiency, or lack of these, the reason for difference. This attitude is the maladjustment common to all Negroes and peculiar to them.

The attitude is seen in a thousand things; it is sometimes loud and uncivil, as in the cases of the Rev. Thomas Dixon's or James K. Vardeman's, or Senator Tillman's agitations, or it is quiet and polite, as in the case of a Northern employer who refuses the Negro applicant for promotion, or for a place other than in menial service, merely on the ground of his color rather than fitness. It is unsuspectingly reflected by many good housewives who say, "I don't want a

Negro girl to work for me, for I have had one and she was unsatisfactory," not thinking that if she used the same reasoning with girls she would be forced to do all her work herself. Or it is seen in the laborers who will not work with a competent Negro foreman, or the clerks who threaten to strike if a Negro is put on the force. It is causing gradual segregation in the public schools; has caused it in the Christian church, and threatens to make the brotherhood of Christ spoken of, a hollow mockery in America.



### **Evil Results.**

This attitude causes general weakness and waste. First, in the Negro it causes general demoralization, and thus compli-

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cates the problem of inefficiency, poverty, etc., which some mistake for the Negro problem. It encourages, in Negroes, low ideals, in that it separates them from the community, and says to them in so many words that the best is not for them.

But it has a bad effect upon the community, for it deprives the manufacturer and the business man in general of a very valuable labor supply. It also, by causing labor unions to discriminate against Negroes, robs the cause of labor of a powerful ally. How powerful this ally is, was only hinted at when, with the aid of less than 500 Negroes, the meat packers of Chicago were able to break the stockyards strike of 1904, and with still fewer Negroes, the teamsters' strike, in 1905, involving 100,000 whites, was broken. These strikes were veritable industrial wars. But Negroes are not strike-break-



ers by choice. They are from necessity of self-protection, for the average laboring man has not seen that the interests of black and white labor can be the same because of the attitude referred to. The attitude has weakened the church. Ministers who preach for African missions are often, because of this attitude, afraid to say a kind word for the Negro in America or to visit their Negro parishioners. Thus those who should preach and lead the world to that great ideal of the Christ Master are actually going back on this ideal in so far as the Negro is concerned. It has made the democracy of which we dreamed, only a dream. It has caused white men of the South, fearing an impossible hallucination of "Negro domination," to vote solidly, irrespective of conviction, on purely political affairs, and it is the chief corner-stone for the building

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up of a system of caste in a proposed democracy. Because of this attitude of separation, no Negro is safe in any community, nor is his family or his property. Try as we may, we can never protect a people who are psychologically separate. They will always be the prey of the larger group.



### **The Solution.**

Such is the Negro problem; such, some of its far-reaching results. Can it be solved? How? It can be solved. But it is not to be solved from without; by merely working on Negroes. Education of the Negroes does not solve it; nor does amassing of property by them, or becoming self-respecting and law-abiding. Indeed, the most bitter and savage out-

break of race feeling we have had in years occurred in the city of Atlanta, which has more Negro colleges than any other city in the country, and in a community where nearly every Negro's home was owned by himself, and which had been publicly praised by the Mayor for being so law-abiding as to need no policemen. Men who were attacked and mishandled by the mob of whites included graduates from Yale University, Boston University, two presidents of a college and others, all well-to-do, and some, according to Southern standards, wealthy; and, according to a report of a committee of white citizens of Atlanta, "not one of the Negroes killed and wounded in the riot was of the criminal class. Every one was industrious, respectable and law-abiding." I might give hundreds, indeed thousands, of facts to

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show that the problem is intensified with wealth, industry and culture on the part of Negroes, and that the less the culture, or the more the degradation, the less is the problem realized. A poor, illiterate and even vicious and diseased Negro servant is admitted to the comforts of hotels and palace cars, when Negroes of culture and wealth are denied.

The problem can only be solved by a change of attitude of the public mind from that of indifference, opposition or depreciation, to one not especially favoring the Negroes, but one of fairness and justice and consideration. Only by awakening the American conscience, which now is soundly asleep, can this problem find solution. First, the Christian ministers ought to be leaders in the movement, for they are theoretically committed to it by the brotherhood teachings of their Christ.

Then the social teachers who have the ideal of democracy ought to practice and teach the throwing off of this undemocratic distinction. The business man can give the black man a fair chance without special favor, and insist upon his right to do so, even though his employes at first object. The labor leaders can slowly educate the laboring classes that the interests of all laborers are one. The politician can help the country greatly by striving to eliminate the race issue. The solution cannot be accomplished en masse; it is to be a slow change in the mental attitude of the whole white race.



### **Not a Hopeless Task.**

It is not a hopeless task, as developments in this country since the war have

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shown. Forty years ago, for example, being a policeman in this city or clerking in the post office was a "white man's job;" but one by one Negroes have entered these places, and though there was protest at first, scarcely any one objects to-day. The Midvale Steel Company has given a valuable lesson in what quiet insistence will do, in that it has insisted upon letting Negroes come into the plant, and now no one objects. Thousands of business men have done the same, with a like experience, thus helping to solve the problem. Indeed, it seems that the business men have outstripped those to whom we naturally look—the ministers of the Gospel—in this respect.

Then there is general ignorance of the Negro race. Most people think they know the Negro, and are unwilling to learn; hence, they make adjustment more

difficult. In speaking of the conference in Atlanta concerning the riot, Mr. Hopkins, one of Atlanta's leading lawyers and a Southerner by birth, is reported to have said: "I believe those Negroes understood the situation better than we did. I was astonished at their intelligence and diplomacy \* \* \* I didn't know that there were such Negroes in Atlanta." Such a statement shows that Mr. Hopkins is making progress toward the solution of this vexed problem, and like him, leaders of thought and public-spirited men ought to seek to inform themselves concerning the real condition, seek to cooperate with the best Negroes and patiently work for the truer and purer democracy.

This, of course, demands a deal of moral courage; often a bit of sacrifice for principle, which in being worked out will

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not only relieve the Negroes, but strengthen the white race even more.

To recapitulate then: The Negro problem is the problem of mental attitude of whites toward the Negro, preventing the assimilation of Negroes into American economic life. It, therefore, robs the country of much economic benefit, making progress slower, and even retarding business development (as when the bank clearings of Atlanta fell thousands of dollars after the riot), depriving the labor cause of one of its most leadable and teachable allies. This attitude demoralizes Negroes, crushes ambition, but aids crime and immorality and tends to increase poverty. The Negro problem can be solved only by awakening the sleeping conscience of the whites, who dominate. This solution of the Negro problem will be the greatest achievement of American democracy and



Christianity. Patience, toleration, contact and co-operation with the best of the Negroes, differentiation as to character and efficiency, rather than color, and constant insistence upon human rights to work, to live, to progress, instead of the emphasis of the superiority of whites over blacks, are some of the factors and forces which will bring about the change, and all men of intelligence and patriotism ought to lead in bringing it about.

I would not close without paying a well-deserved tribute to W. D. Weatherford, a Secretary of the International Committee of the Y. M. C. A. among the colleges for white men of the South. He is a Southern man of culture, and he has written a book on "The Negro in the South," the best book written by a Southerner, which shows wide knowledge and an enlightened conscience. I think this is only an

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indication of what the Southerner of culture will continue to do when he becomes really enlightened.









