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RACE, CULTURAL GROUPS, SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION

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THE NEW NEGRO HOKUM

GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS STEWART

OF ALL the solemn nonsense with which this "greatest nation on earth" loves to salve its vanity bump, the still nebulous but rapidly crystalizing New Negro legend approaches indistinguishably close to the superlative degree of unmitigated bunk. For nothing agitates so penetratingly our "body politic," convulsing it from periphery to inmost core, as does our diverting Negro problem. Hence, to hail with shouts of joyous approval the emergence of a new disconcerting element which promises further to confuse an admittedly befuddling situation, a new figure which, despite the assiduous beating of tom-toms and industrious barkers' spiels, stubbornly remains incorporeal, frustrating all mediumistic conjurations designed to raise it from the shadowy realm of imagination, is either sheer hallucination or goose-like gullibility.

This mythological figure is assuming an increasing public importance. He is being "put over" with appropriate technique, carefully selected from that body of now familiar publicity stunts which "sold" us the World War. There is persistent repetition that he has come to establish a reign of justice and recognition for the oppressed Aframerican. Sophisticated metropolitan dilettantes and migratory

doctors of philosophy acclaim him. Newspapers, magazines, books glorify him. He is heralded with that same widespread fanfare which modern American advertising concentrates upon any article it expects to ram down the public's throats and "make 'em like it." If in his case the fanfare happens not to be boundingly delirious, if it halts and limps a bit and threatens to putter out disappointingly, if apologists persuasively suggest the unpopularity of the subject's color as reason for this lack of enthusiastic bruiting, nevertheless the effectiveness with which "the message gets across" must be conceded. It is therefore well to inquire who and what is this New Negro.

In the first place and according to his gospel, he is a real, honest-to-God he-man, keen-eyed, keen-minded, virile, red-blooded, two-fisted and challenging. He is at one and the same time both champion and despiser of the weak among his dark-skinned compatriots, the noble knight who resents and redresses all insults heaped upon the poverty-stricken, the widows and orphans, the Negro's latter day savior from the damnation of American race prejudice. Among laborers he is both contemner of the strike-breaking scab and upstanding giant storming single-handedly the gold-barred gates

of capitalistic exploitation and the color-locked portals of trade unions. In politics he is aggressive and achieving, demanding and securing his basic human rights—or just about to do so; in religion he is a cock-sure, if windy atheist, despising orthodox forms as soporific pap for the feeble-minded; in education he is proclaimed as superior to the machine-made American school product, contending for the “best” for his race, though at times rather uncertain just what that “best” is; but in art—in *art*—here is the holy of holies—he is a shining and blessed light, both creator of new symbols and incomparable votary bringing his own peculiar and inimitable and perfect offerings. This is the New Negro, or this is the idealistic personage so advertised. If he isn’t our good old calamity-breeding friend of Teutonic extraction, erstwhile and in more sunny days dubbed superman who, made uncomfortable “in the old country” by such hard-boiled practicalities as Dawes plans, Saar occupations, bewildered ministries and economic collapses, has emigrated to the “land of the pilgrim’s pride” to masquerade under a kinky crown and sable skin, then this starry visitant and paragon must be one of Grimm’s all conquering princes bodily resuscitated.

All this “newness” among Negroes, particularly in music, poetry, drama and other literary forms, in drawing, painting and sculpture, to say nothing of matters more mundane, dates from one or both of two interdependent occurrences, the so-called Negro migration—as a matter of uninspiring fact Negroes are still rather overwhelmingly settled in the South—or the World War. The New Negro seems to have been swaddled either during the northward hegira or to have arisen god-like out of the desolation and disillusion of mankind’s recent holocaust. However that may be, the inference is that prior to

these occurrences only “old” Negroes peopled the land, “old” Negroes being the woolly headed Uncle Toms, bland and obsequious, spineless and grinning, tale bearing and treacherous, accepting obloquy with one hand and old clothes with the other from their adored white patrons, the proverbial “good darkey” of regretful southern memory and the abhorred “white folks’ nigger” of Aframerican loathing.

An examination of the Negro’s life in this country, from his forced landing here until the coming of this ebon Messiah, refutes this; refutes it in all those avenues of human endeavor which the apostles of the New Negro declare he has suddenly and resplendently opened; refutes it first in those divers by-plays of human intercourse which we may call the “custom of the country,” and in such more or less definite spheres of civilized activity as industry, politics, religion, education and—sanctissima!—art.

When the Negro made his unsought and unwilling entry into this haven of the oppressed, this “land of the free,” the custom of the country was to disembark him with the status of slave and zealously to maintain him in that station. Heavy theological controversies raged to invest that status with divine sanction, while some of the “best blood” of the country reddened southern cotton fields to confirm it. The Negro remained a slave for more than two centuries. During these to him seemingly interminable years there was manifest with irritating frequency to slaveholders the same undying spirit of revolt against injustice, of determination to enjoy “inalienable rights” as is now diligently advertised as one of the New Negro’s differentiating characteristics. Otherwise the world would never have heard of fugitive slave laws, the Underground Railroad, Dred Scott, Denmark

Vesey, John Brown. New Negroes—only they were cursed as “bad niggers” then—were evidently annoyingly numerous, for there were sporadic slave uprisings of alarming proportions, while the auction block and the overseer’s lash doubtless aborted unknown others.

From emancipation until this black deliverer descended from Sinai, American practice has been to surround the Negro with ever-tightening steel rings of galling proscription, with periodic individual atrocities like Aiken and grand scale murder like East St. Louis thrown in to heighten the tension. Yet during this advent period many independent Negroes demanded unflinchingly the right to live and move and have their being unmolested in this commonwealth. They spread their demands before the public while occupying influential governmental posts. They voiced their protests in great public assemblies and in skilfully written documents. They formed organizations to secure the ends for which they fought, some of which exist today, while one, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, has become the sole powerful agency with a definite and realizable promise of ultimate relief of the Negro’s disabilities. Incidentally, it will require the mediation of some such instrumentality to unfetter the beating pinions of this New Negro.

From the arrival of this dusky Parsifal until this very moment there has been no perceptible change in the American intention to encircle the Negro with unbreakable bonds of race prejudice. Here and there legal dents in these bonds have been made, as in the recent Supreme Court decisions affecting New Orleans segregation, Texas secret orders and primaries, and the earlier Arkansas cases. But these legal indentations are mere tappings, distressingly futile, upon the custom of

the country, which in all essentials remains rigidly bent to “keep the nigger in his place.” Here and there also a startling and sobering blow has been dealt by race riots. After the dead have been counted and sickeningly identified, the custom of the country, at least in a particular locality, has reelingly recovered some semblance of discretion, and has in consequence become less fanatically devoted to pernicious attention to Negroes.

But who fights these battles? The New Negro? At least some of those for civil rights were begun and successfully terminated before his heaven-sent appearance. Moreover, it has been more than once remarked that it is the hoodlum element—the street lounge, the pool-room habitue, expert in knife juggling and bullet dodging, to whom fighting is an exhilarating avocation—who strikes back so effectively when the city mob gathers to “teach the nigger a lesson.” And it has also been said that it is the much touted New Negro who, after “the tumult and the shouting dies,” comes in for surveys and conferences and interracial backscratching and ponderous tomes, all to explain how the “criminal misunderstanding and great catastrophe” might have been avoided!

Industrially the American Negro, slave and emancipated, has been assigned chiefly the rôles of menial and unskilled laborer. No saving grace of the New Negro has as yet altered this situation. Certain forces quite beyond his initiation or control have operated to elevate slightly the Negro’s low economic level, but in the main his poor industrial status remains discouragingly fixed. Legislative curtailment of the European supply of mechanically perfect robots created a void in the labor market. Into this vacuum poured a stream of eager-eyed plantation hands from Dixie, their souls

aglow with visions of big wages and a dubious equality. Yet in the North as elsewhere, the Negro remains generally confined to personal service and the rough tasks requiring only weak minds and strong backs for their perfect performance. Here and there may be noted a black foreman, a black chemist, a black draftsman, a black accountant, or other highly trained technician as part of an important corporation, but the occurrence is so unusual as to receive undue notice and to be accorded quite disproportionate significance. The inescapable fact is that the control of American industry is held by investments of capital contributed by white people, a fact which, through the subtle operation of race prejudice, renders the Negro an industrial beggar, dependent upon whatever crumbs he may be able to capture in a deadly scramble with his preferred and more powerful white brother. He is the nation's industrial pariah. His unenviable and dispiriting portion is to wait for any possible industrial amelioration upon the whims of the unfavorably disposed white lords of creation.

That he will wait longer than his white competitor is therefore evident. All the more so as he is totally without leverage himself to budge the plutocratic dominance. Moreover, proud of a stupefying tradition of loyalty and terrified by the Bolshevik bogey, he fears to align himself openly with the more heretical labor movements on the one hand, while on the other no manner of supplication or demanding or threatening gesture avails to admit him into the orthodox bodies. In consequence such advantages as are won by organized labor he either misses completely, or they come to him only as a result of a general improvement in the labor situation—more crumbs!

To remedy his mendicancy the per-

sistently press-agented New Negro is powerless. With his brethren he too must take what he can get. He can effectively demand nothing. The only possible exception is the present effort to organize the Pullman porters, a movement as yet fiercely antagonized by the capital involved, hardly more than experimental among the workers, and certainly incomplete. Nevertheless, this is the one movement giving some basis in fact to the grandiose advertisement of the New Negro. It should be remembered, however, that there have always been Negroes who have sensed the raw unfairness which, solely on account of color, arbitrarily assigns them inferior industrial prerogatives and privileges, who have kindled at the swollen hypocrisy of the brotherhoods and unions which similarly deny them membership. Such militant individuals have talked and worked to better these conditions, and have won some measure of success. But generally speaking, all this systematic furore generated to stage the figure of a New Negro suddenly uprisen and heroic, striking the fetters from black labor, is empty and sonorous farce.

But if the New Negro seems to be disappointingly ineffectual in attempted adjustments of social and industrial relations between the races, it is in politics that he is completely voiceless. It may be he is too refined a being to play so coarse a game. The grime and sweat of America's recurring rough and tumble electoral scrimmage are fatal to Olympian refulgence. At any rate, Negroes seem still eminently capable of holding only second-rate political appointments, while their usual post-election rewards are genial tasks like mopping corridors, emptying majestic brass cuspidors, and cleansing toilet bowls. This is as it has latterly been, particularly during the paper-glori-

ous period ushered in by the New Negro. Before that time Negroes in the national congress and state legislatures were far from unusual. A few held prominent national political posts, while many minor officials testified to the efficacy of campaign pressure Negroes formerly exerted. Paradoxical as it may seem, some of the most enlightened legislation which Dixie ever took time enough off from her regular occupation of "keeping the nigger down" to consider was originated by Negroes, and by Negroes only a few months removed from slavery. Time was when what certain forceful Negroes had to say politically was heeded, as mere mention of the name of Frederick Douglass indicates. Of course, there were then venal Negroes to whom cash in hand was infinitely more desirable than uncertain messengerships and obscure clerical berths. And so there are today. But in addition, there is not now in American politics, and has not been for years, a single outstanding Negro individual or accomplishment, not forgetting the hopeful outlook in Illinois and in New York, Georgia's continuing muddle, and Tennessee's recent amazing somersault in the Memphis municipal election. But it should be remarked right here that of two New Negroes who essayed political careers in the free atmosphere of a northern political paradise where "you can get away with murder," as the saying is, it is reported that one suffered such devastating loss of prestige among his fellows and such wholesale withdrawal of patronage of offended whites that he was compelled to abandon his highly remunerative, highly respected and highly desirable berth in a Negro uplift organization, and was rescued from complete disaster only by a timely transfer to other parts graciously made by the aforesaid uplift organization, while the other was

totally overwhelmed by the deluge of opposition and has since dwelt in all but impenetrable and unbroken silence, lost alike to his black brethren and to those white worshippers who once hungered for the honeyed words of wisdom which dropped from his learned lips. It seems to be a fact that whatever political influence the Negro may claim in the North is possessed by the "old" Negroes, the seasoned henchmen of typical bosses. And it goes without conjecture that only the satisfactory or "old" type Negro, however modern and well educated, can for the present expect to acquire and keep any measure of political preferment in the South. There the New Negro would hardly think of announcing any political choice, to say nothing of duplicating the just recited experience of his defeated brothers lest immediately the kluckers' tarpot be set a-boiling. If, then, this blessed redemptive force in Aframerican life called the New Negro is wielding any influence whatsoever it is certainly not discernible in politics.

Similarly in the field of religion, New Negro thought is without discoverable weight. Those who like to think of themselves as belonging to the same celestial lineage as the demi-god they worship strut about privately in a clamorous atheism, but their pose has no appreciable effect on the mass of Negroes, for the simple and sufficient reason that Negro religionists are too heavily and too immovably orthodox. In the public utterances of these self-acclaimed New Negroes scientific refutation of dogma or, what is far easier, empty scoffing at the religious forms so dear to the herd, is singularly absent. No black pulpiteer, no matter how liberal, no matter with what intellectual doubts tormented, would sacrifice his easy life and joyous camaraderie with the sisters for so un-

remunerative and prosaic a consideration as mere inner honesty. Moreover, if he did, the spiritually bereft would promptly crucify him, and not even the New Negro courts Golgotha. Indeed, it happens that a crusading young Negro, whom the New Negro movement proudly claims, was only yesterday forced to give up the headship of a growing sociological experiment, ostensibly and officially for "administrative inefficiency," but really because, along with certain unregenerate opinions about white supremacy and Negro sycophancy, he holds a coldly analytical attitude towards all religions and was therefore accused of corrupting the youth committed to his charge. Periodicals rampantly propagating the New Negro cult dare not jeopardize their enormous but wavering, oftentimes smut-bolstered circulations by the procedure which integrity demands. Where nickels are the all precluding desiderata such honesty is palpably inept. They therefore never discuss religion critically. In consequence of all this, if the "old" Negro, so soon to be superseded, is the one who takes his religion in ample fundamentalist doses washed down with gulps of emotional suds, he is and has always been in the ascendant. Unlettered, yowling jacks-in-boxes, in long coats and longer faces, still pull the bulk of the twelve million Aframericans around by spiritual leading strings, chloroforming them with stuff worse than medieval doctrinal imbecilities. Meanwhile devotees of the New Negro persuasion confirm this tyranny by a self-advantaging silence.

The New Negro propaganda would spread the belief that in education he is a force not to be ignored. It is he alone who, being himself the best result of American educational processes, must have the best for his dark-skinned fraters. For decades there has been much uncer-

tainty in the minds of Negro educators as to what is best for their students. Fiery battles have been fought over this matter. There have been three parties to the frays—those who advocate so-called higher education, those who champion industrial or vocational training, and those who fail to see that the Negro should be paternalistically set aside for special treatment, regarding him as subject to such educational experiments as may be adopted as a national program. Among modern educated Negroes this confusion still prevails. But certain it is that the only widely recognized educational achievement among American Negroes was accomplished not by New Negroes. Tuskegee Institute embodied a novel idea. Yet Booker Washington was assailed during his lifetime as conniving opportunist and bedeviled traitor, as sublimated Uncle Tom and handpicked Moses of his race—as exactly what the New Negro proponents call "old" Negro. It is only since the Tuskegee idea has been made respectable by institutions like Antioch and systems like Gary that these attacks have ceased. No new educational movement among Negroes has since begun. The universities and colleges grind out annually thousands of standardized bachelors, masters and doctors, their degrees apparently mere rubber-stamp concessions to the vogue of the day. The New Negro graduate is a mill product along with the rest. If he is capable of becoming a genuine pioneer in education, if he has any original didactic, if he can do other than lose all trace of his individuality and initiative as a cog in the great American scholastic machine, he has yet to demonstrate such capacity. Most assuredly he produces no text books, develops no new ideas of school management, creates no new methods, evolves no great teachers, founds no unique institutions.

And now *art*. According to the propaganda, here is the New Negro's real and vitalizing milieu. No sphere reflects his splendor like this one. He is at once art's ardent worshipper and adored creator. He is not only the playful child of the sun, responding spontaneously and in a thousand charming ways to Nature's swiftly changing panorama, thus instinctively artistic, but he is also custodian of a peculiar heritage of surprising art forms compounded somehow of African jungle orgies, tragic slave experiences, occidental sophistication, and barrel-house crudities. These remarkable and extravagant claims are of themselves provocative of skepticism or downright amused blasphemy on the part of the irreverent, while a cursory examination of their content drowns them in doubt. For example, in the pictorial arts the New Negro has yet to meet the challenge flung down years ago by Tanner. As regards the theatre, it is probably due to the entree made by Cole and Johnson, Williams and Walker, Kersands and Dudley, that later celebrities owe their opportunities. With an eye towards campaign possibilities, however, the New Negroes have appropriated every recent histrionic addition. Thus the names of persons of recognized ability, like Gilpin and Robeson, Mills and Gee, Sissle and Blake, as well as those of almost every exceptionally nimble gyrating black comedian and drumstick contortionist, embellish their lengthening who's who.

The case is similar in music. While hitherto no Negro has reached the heights of international renown won by Roland Hayes, yet preceding him by many years were Sissieretta Jones and Flora Batson, Mme. Selika and "The Black Swan," the original Fisk Singers, Burleigh and Douglass. Moreover, in spite of the excessive faddism which today "puts over" the

spirituals with such tremendous elan, it is not to be forgotten that these songs are the unique creation of the hooted "old" Negro. Incidentally, they constitute a further example of the New Negro cult's appropriating penchant. Even blues and jazz are but the evolution of earlier ragtime, much of which was created by Negroes antedating the present fulsome era of New Negro buncombe.

However, it is in literature that this golden being's glory is said to eclipse all previous manifestations. In fact there has been here, so the indefatigable New Negro puffers say, such a resurgence of high ordered output that only the phrase "Negro Renaissance" adequately describes it. What is this renaissance? There have appeared possibly a score of novels, some written by Negroes, some by whites. These range all the way from serious, sympathetic but unsentimental attempts at portrayal of all phases of American Negro life to rollicking profanity and hilarious smut, with here and there a bit of poignant and pregnant expression, a glimpse of searing tragedy, a ray of irrepressible humor, with much conscious propaganda, a large proportion of artificiality and labored "niggerisms," and in perspective, all quite unimportant and ephemeral. Inspired by literary contests sponsored by certain magazines, some writing grading slightly above the mediocre has been uncovered. In poetry there have been disclosed glistening barbs of beauty alongside of the same sort of ribald versification formerly spewed out to the accompaniment of a crazy piano in the nineteenth century combination saloon and bawdy house, and even now to be encountered with unconscious and intriguing variations in any army barracks. Whatever worthwhile drama has been produced is the work of whites.

This is the Negro Renaissance—one

wonders why the prefix "re" should be employed—the particular pride of the whoopers-up for the New Negro. In all this literary production has appeared nothing new, unless it be that "new" embraces certain persons hitherto obscure but now thrust into public notice. The emergence of these "new" writers has been accompanied by a blast of publicity heralding the Negro Renaissance. The technique of manufacturing this renaissance seems to be this. First comes a sustained pumping up of enthusiastic expectancy of the approaching divine event, followed by vociferous iteration that "here it is," and then a well-timed, suitably advertised settling back into the conviction—"yes, sure enough, here it is"—all smacking of the hocus-pocus that made Houdini famous and demonstrating once again the truth of Barnum's dictum anent the undiminishing crop of gulls. Meanwhile—and perhaps "this is the crux of the matter," as ancient teachers of philosophy are still fond of remarking—all this whoop-la about the New Negro and his renaissance is not without profit to budding scribes, precariously financed Aframerican editors, and to even popular authors

of bizarre books as well as to shrewd money-scenting publishers.

Let it be repeated finally that there is no New Negro. What the Negro is doing today in a cultural, economic and civic way he has always been doing. The basis of all this unceasing chatter about the New Negro lies in the fact that what he has always been doing he is now doing better. In other words, there are now more Negroes with something to say, more capable of saying it convincingly, and possessed of more media through which to say it. What else is to be expected after a half-century of education and intelligent contact with western civilization? Negroes are today more articulate than they were ten, twenty-five years ago. They have in their own press a medium of incalculable force, while increasingly the columns of metropolitan monthlies, of erudite quarterlies are opening to them. Publishing houses solitict their manuscripts, prominent colleges invite them to lecture, great absorbed audiences tumultuously applaud as they sing, speak or act. They are being heard and seen and felt and understood as never before. But a New Negro? Hardly!

A STOCK-TAKING CONFERENCE ON THE NEGRO

GUY B. JOHNSON

A SOMEWHAT unique conference, known as a Stock-Taking and Fact-Finding Conference on the American Negro, was held in Durham, N. C., December 7-9, 1927. To this conference came Negro churchmen, educators, journalists, social workers, manufacturers, business men, lawyers, doctors, labor leaders, and other types. The papers read were excellent, almost without ex-

ception, and the discussions were always interesting, sometimes exciting.

In this conference the various currents and cross currents of Negro life stood out as they do not stand out in the ordinary meeting of some particular group or profession. Here were churchmen and educators like Dr. Mordecai Johnson, Dr. George E. Haynes, and Dr. C. H. Tobias face to face with the "scrap-the-church"