
The Outlook for the Negro

Author(s): Josiah Morse

Source: *The Sewanee Review*, Apr., 1920, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Apr., 1920), pp. 152-159

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27533306>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Sewanee Review*

THE OUTLOOK FOR THE NEGRO

The Great War, which shook the whole world and shattered Europe, upsetting institutions, governments, and customs, and in some places (*e. g.*, Russia) turning them completely upside down, has affected variously the different orders of the Great Society. The unduly privileged it has filled with grief and despair. There is no silver lining to the cloud above them. The deluge is here, and their doom is sealed. The exploited, the oppressed and disinherited—at the other extreme—it has filled with new hopes and dreams, in which, according to Freudian laws, they are seeking full compensation for their long repressed desires and denied ideas of justice and fair play.

This is true of the American Negro no less than of the Russian, the Pole, the Jugo-Slav, the Armenian, and the other peoples of Eastern and Central Europe. For the American Negro had his share also in the war, and did his bit very creditably. He furnished 250,000 men, sent an equal number into the various war industries, purchased more than \$225,000,000 worth of the war bonds, and gave liberally to the Red Cross and other war organizations. The war made a new man of him, *and therein lies one of the chief causes of the recent clashes between some members of his race and some members of the white race.*

Borrowing terms from genetic psychology, we may say that the war brought the Negro's long period of childhood to a close and projected him almost violently into adolescence, giving him a new sense of strength and ability, mental and physical, and a corresponding desire for larger opportunities and privileges. He has now entered upon the "storm and stress" period of his racial existence, a period which, as the descriptive phrase characterizing it indicates, is the opposite of peaceful and satisfied. The Negro is going to be, for a time, more restless, possibly more lawless and troublesome, and certainly more dissatisfied, than he has been in all his history. And it is not going to be because he will have less of anything (indeed, he already has much more of everything), but because his flood of new impulses will not be under adequate control, and his wants and ambitions will have outrun both his

The Outlook for the Negro

own capacity to satisfy them at once, and the willingness of the whites to grant them forthwith and *in toto*.

This leads us to the second factor in the race problem—the new adjustments to the changed conditions which the whites will find it necessary to make. It is always difficult for an individual, and much more so for a group, to make such adjustments. Even parents find it difficult to adjust themselves to the changes in their children which natural growth and development bring about. It means the breaking up of old habits and attitudes and the formation of new ones. Most human beings are so lazy-minded that they hate the persons or conditions that compel them to exert themselves.

This 'lazy-mindedness' is a universal human trait of profound significance, and deserving of further consideration. Biologically and psychologically, it means resistance on the part of the mind to whatever threatens to disturb its comfortable adjustments and throw it into a state of unstable equilibrium, that is, of unrest, uncertainty, and uneasiness. In the lower animals this natural inertia meets with no counter force or stimulus; consequently each species long ago adjusted itself most comfortably and with the least expenditure of effort to its own environment, and has remained there contentedly ever since. The lower animals have made no progress. They feel no need of progress. They and their environments remain fixed.

In man there is much of the animal with its natural inertia and aversion to change. But there is also (and this it is which differentiates him from the rest of the animal kingdom) a 'divine discontent' with things and adjustments as they are: an initiative and inventiveness that impel him to explore and experiment in the hope of improving upon former conditions. This spiritual 'urge' is the secret of human advancement.

Of course, it is not present in equal degree in all human beings. In the vast majority of men the animal inertia is greater than the 'divine discontent', which accounts for the survival of outworn customs and traditions, for hyper-conservatism and lack of progress. The business of education, in the broadest sense of the term, is continuously to seek to overcome the animal inertia and to make improved adjustments to the new, the different,

difficult, and increasingly complex elements in our environment. The educated man is one who is tolerant of the new and the different, and who has the energy and intelligence to make and unmake adjustments. There is a new Negro in the South, the product of five years of human struggle which are easily the equivalent of any hundred earlier years of human history. We shall prove the quality of our education by our willingness and ability to adjust ourselves to him.

First cousin to the above-mentioned inertia is what is commonly known as prejudice. Prejudice is an undue and unwarranted aversion to or predilection for anything or anybody. It is blind and deaf to reason. Its roots reach down to the instincts which have to do with self-preservation and the perpetuation of the species, and to the habits and customs which in the long ago made living safe and easy. The species-prejudice of the lower animals and the race-prejudice of man find their explanations in these biological considerations. Lacking reason, the animals have used instinct and blind prejudice to protect themselves against actual and potential foes. But with the dawn of reason in man a new and better instrument of protection and aggression was given, and man became emancipated from the complete domination of instinct and prejudice. More and more he could afford to observe, get acquainted, and postpone action until judgment had matured and decision had been reached.

Our age has frequently been labelled the 'age of reason', but this of course is only partly true. Prejudice is by no means dead in the world. Indeed, it seems to have taken on a new lease of life. Everywhere reason and justice are at grips with prejudice and instinct in a post-bellum struggle, but happily there is little doubt of the outcome. In the new era, reason and justice will dominate instinct and prejudice.

The foregoing observations are already exemplified in the condition of the Negro in our country. Despite the increase in lynchings and mob violence during the last year and their spread over the entire country, the status of the Negro is better and higher, and his human rights more widely and readily recognized than they have ever been. Contemporary race disturbances are in reality evidences of rapid growth, not of deterioration or decay.

Everywhere in the South the whites are acknowledging that not nearly enough has been spent on Negro education, and are of their own accord making substantial increases in the appropriations therefor. Likewise, they are admitting that the housing and sanitary conditions should be greatly improved, and are making beginnings in these directions. They are not only paying the Negro much larger wages, but are admitting the justice of the increase. Judges and juries are becoming more even-handed, notwithstanding the contrary evidences that get into the newspapers. The Negroes are prospering, working with less strain, and living better than ever before. Many elements in the working classes of Europe are not so well conditioned as the Southern Negro. Despite the great change that has come over him and the difficulty of making readjustments to him, the prejudice against him has considerably decreased.

A noteworthy evidence of this fact is to be seen in the work of the Committee on the After-the-War Program to bring about a better relationship between the two races in the South. This Committee is composed of one or more citizens from each of the Southern states, and has a field agent and white and colored workers in each state, organizing county committees to meet from time to time with similar Negro committees and to discuss in a friendly and helpful way all matters that concern the well-being of both races, separately and collectively. The platform the county committees are asked to adopt is as follows: (1) Justice before the law, to include prevention of lynching and other denials of legal justice to the Negro; (2) adequate educational facilities; (3) sanitary housing and living conditions; (4) recreational facilities; (5) economic justice; (6) equality of travelling facilities; (7) welcoming returned colored soldiers; and (8) employment for colored soldiers. Some idea of the size of the work of the Committee may be gained from the fact that at the end of the first year more than \$200,000 will have been spent upon it.

Race friction and conflict, as observed above, spring from instinct and prejudice, and all the misunderstandings, suspicions, and evil passions that are bred by them. In these interracial conferences dominated by reason, such suspicions and misunderstandings tend to be dispelled, and feelings of sympathy and

goodwill and a spirit of coöperation are generated that will enable the two races to live side by side with more harmony and mutual helpfulness. The writer spent some six weeks last summer meeting with groups of representative citizens in thirty communities in South Carolina. Day after day he was agreeably surprised and often amazed by the advanced positions taken by one or more of the best citizens in these communities. Everywhere there was enthusiastic approval of the conference idea, and everywhere the desire was manifest to live with the Negro in peace and to be of substantial service to him. Similar reports continue to come from all the other Southern states.

Not less important is the work that the University Commission on Race Questions has been doing among college students during the past eight years. The Commission is composed of one representative from each of the Southern state universities. It has held a number of meetings in various Southern cities, and in all these and in several of the larger Negro colleges it has listened to presentations by capable Negroes of their side of the race problem. From time to time the Commission has issued open letters to the college men of the South, setting forth the results of its deliberations, and these have recently been collected and published in pamphlet form under the title, *Four Open Letters from the University Commission on Race Questions to the College Men of the South*. These letters deal with the crime of lynching, the need of better educational facilities for the Negro, the Negro migration, and the new reconstruction. Their publication has elicited widespread discussion and has stimulated the study of the Negro problem in Southern colleges.

These efforts to mitigate race prejudice and to secure justice for the Negro have not weakened in the slightest degree the determinations that there shall be no infusion of Negro blood in the white race, and that socially the two peoples shall remain apart. Happily, these determinations are in accord with the wishes of all self-respecting Negroes, and as the pride of race continues to develop in their people, the large amount of friction now due to the fear of these things on the part of the whites will cease. Both peoples need to realize that racial integrity is not incompatible with mutual respect. The brotherhood of man towards which civili-

zation is struggling does not mean a promiscuous mingling of the races, but only a decent and wholesome regard for the personality of each race.

Less strong is the determination to deny to the Negro all political privileges. Numbers of Southerners are admitting that no obstacle to voting should be put in the way of respectable, property-owning Negroes. But the memories of the corrupt and humiliating Negro rule during the Reconstruction period continue to hang over the South like a pall. If the white South could believe that the Negro would vote for the best measures and men, and not for the worst, the opposition to his enfranchisement would be reduced to a minimum. But there is a natural reluctance to jeopardize again the white civilization by an act of impractical idealism. The Negro must clearly earn his enfranchisement and prove his fitness for it, not merely insist on it as his right. No group has a right to tear down civilization, or to lower the standard of culture already attained. A fundamental democratic principle is that the right to govern should rest solely upon the capacity to govern, but until the Negroes generally show their capacity those who now have it will suffer more or less curtailment of their right.

Here we encounter a species of prejudice that is most unjust and unjustifiable in its operation, and which must be overcome, if the fullest measure of justice and fair play is to obtain in the relationship between the two races. It is the prejudice that makes sweeping generalizations and acts upon them as if they were true. All Negroes are lumped together, reduced to the lowest common denominator, and dealt with on that basis. As a matter of fact, there are as wide differences among Negroes as among other races. Indeed, we should speak of Negro races rather than of the Negro race. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* enumerates some four hundred different tribes in Africa, varying widely among themselves in physique and appearance, in language, customs, occupations, and in many other ways, indicating mentalities of different orders. The American Negro is also of many varieties and orders of mentality and character, the tendency to overlook which and to observe only the similarity or sameness of color among them is the cause of a large measure of the personal

wrongs suffered by the better elements of the race. The whites need to learn that the Negroes now occupy several cultural levels, and that those occupying the highest level should be treated with more consideration than is now accorded those occupying the lowest. There is a group of Negroes of high school and college education, professional and business men and women, property- and home-owning, moral, religious, useful members of the communities in which they live. A second and larger group is composed of Negroes of but little education, yet honest, steady-working, and ambitious to rise, or at least for their children to rise. A third group is composed of the improvident, unambitious, good-natured, playful, and, on occasion hard-working Negroes. Lastly, there are the immoral, vicious and criminal, the kind that fill the court-rooms and prisons. If each class were treated according to its merits, or, better still, if each individual were treated according to his merits, there would be less ground for complaint.

Complicating and aggravating the race prejudice is the almost equally powerful economic prejudice. One need not be a Marxian Socialist to recognize the enormous rôle played by the economic factor in all human affairs. Whether in California, or Georgia, or Pennsylvania, there will always be an implacable enmity between the members of a higher-standard-of-living group and those of a lower-standard-of-living group. When the Negro's standard of living shall have risen to the point where he will be unable and unwilling to live on less than the white man's minimum, the prejudice now existing against him will be considerably softened. But so long as his presence tends to lower the standard of living he will be considered a menace by those who are economically nearest to him. The economic 'signs of the times' indicate that this source of prejudice will soon be greatly diminished.

The greatest advance has been made in the direction of public equality. The disposition is rapidly growing to give the Negro equal public facilities and service for equal pay. This is seen in improved schools, parks and playgrounds, streets and houses, street-car and railroad facilities, court-room practices and business dealings. When the state legislature of South Carolina appropriated \$100,000 for a memorial to the white soldiers, it appropriated an equal amount for a memorial for the Negro soldiers.

In all things material the ideal of the white South is to be at least mathematically honest, to coöperate and be of assistance; in all things racial and social it is determined to remain distinct. It is not chauvinism to say that the heart of the South is warm and big, as human hearts go. No one knows, not even a Southerner, unless he has especially interested himself in this matter, how much fine thinking and feeling and doing for the Negro is going on all the time, for very little of this is recorded in the press. Only the frictions are heralded in flaming headlines. The Southern whites can justly make the same complaint as that often voiced by the Negroes: that only their faults and crimes are advertised to the world; their good deeds are hidden in small print and often not noticed at all. But it has always been so. The intelligent South does not complain: it is heartily ashamed of the misdeeds of some of its members, even though the provocations are often great. It knows that the true mark of the educated is self-control and respect for law and the institutions of civilized society. But when enemies and fanatics train their eyes and ears to see and hear only the evil in the South, and their tongues and pens to speak and write of it, it is permissible to point out that the notable progress the Negro has made since his emancipation, and the wealth he has accumulated, have been made and accumulated with the consent and encouragement and assistance of the white South. Without these he could hardly have moved a step. And it is safe to predict even greater and swifter progress for him, if only he will be guided by the sane, peace-loving leaders of his own and the white race in the South.

JOSIAH MORSE.

The University of South Carolina.