The New Negro

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THE new negro has become an active force in contemporary America. The great change that has taken place in the psychology of the negro is a thing without parallel in our history. To many it is inexplicable, an enigma. To the ancient in spirit it is a tragedy. It threatens to thwart the race myth. To the progressive it is the auspicious fulfillment of a prophecy. Until recent years the history of the negro in America has been checkered with disaster and despair. Yesterday a hope was born. Today that hope, against disadvantage and discouragement, is groping toward solid ground and realization.

The old negro, according to common conception, was an indolent, docile creature, susceptible to superstition, but not to knowledge. At all events, he was, in general, without the desire for independence. This is an erroneous notion. It is a distortion of historical fact. That the so-called "good nigger" may have made open and tactful display of his admission of inferiority does not prove that the race as a whole was without the spirit of resistance. Before the American Revolution alone, at least twenty-five rebellions of black slaves occurred. These insurrections brought into existence the atrocious slave codes in the South. After the Revolution the rebellions multiplied. In 1800 we discover the Prosser conspiracy in Virginia in which over 11,000 negroes were involved in a valiant attempt to capture the city and the arsenal. In 1831 came the famous Nat Turner revolt which necessitated the dispatch of United States troops to cooperate with the local militia in order to prevent its success. On land and sea insurrections of slaves were abundant and catastrophic. In Haiti, it had been the gallant rebellion of Toussaint L'Ouverture which had defeated Napoleon's endeavor to extend his Western empire through the West Indies. Later, Bolivar achieved the liberation of Mexico and Central America through the aid of money and men derived from the black republic of Haiti. In the past war the American negro defied Western tradition.

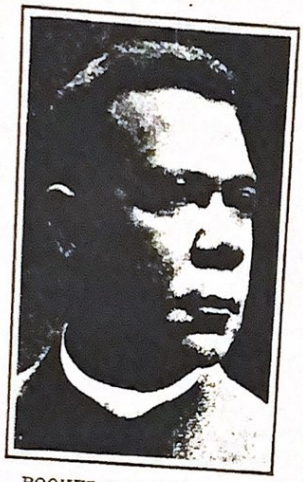
These insurrections, however, this valor and resistance, were evidences of primitive vigor and violence, evidences of recalcitrancy and aggressiveness, but not evidences of a provocative and intelligent rebelliousness. These were the hopeless, maddening struggles of a suppressed race. The new negro is different in reaction. He, too, is rebellious, but in a different manner. His passions have become subtilized, his primitivism refined. He has discovered a new weapon—the pen. The pen has superseded the sword. The mental has subjugated the physical. A new culture is in the process of evolution.

While Phyllis Wheatley, the first negro poet, was penning her verses under the balmy protection of a Northern benefactor, the majority of negroes in America in the eighteenth century were suffering the obliterating torture of enslavement in the South. Her success is illuminating proof of the influence of environment, of social heritage and culture, upon the individual, irrespective of race or color. At the time that Phyllis Wheatley secured her noteworthy triumphs and brought back from England the famous folio edition of Milton's "Paradise Lost," few negroes had acquired the art of writing or studied the science of arithmetic. Neau's school in New York, Benezet's in Philadelphia, another in Boston, reached but a small part of the negro population in the North, and, of course, had no effect below the Mason-Dixon line. Ignorance predominated. The old negro was unintelligent. Circumstances had fettered him to a decadent régime, deprived him of opportunity, robbed him of privilege.

The Civil War gave the negro a tentative freedom. During the time of the maligned carpetbag Governments in the

South, which organized a public-school system, opened the ballot box to thousands, and "abolished the whipping post, the branding iron, and the stocks," the negro had a momentary taste of freedom. The supremacy of the Ku Klux Klan reversed the situation. The black race again became a suppressed group. With the disappearance of chattel slavery, however, freedom of locomotion at least resulted. Migration was no longer illegal. Negro business began to grow slowly. Education advanced. A literature stumblingly came into being. Sentimentality prevailed, but sentimentality that was thoroughly racial. The negro began to feel more certain of himself, to cultivate a confidence in his own powers, to develop a group consciousness.

Such was the growth of the new negro. The war precipitated this growth, but did not create it. The new negro literature and art are not the result of a sudden inspiration, but of a gradual accretion of sensitivity and tradition. Intelligence has replaced ignorance, science has supplanted superstition.



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The new negro is different from the old negro in intelligence and spirit. What changes have taken place that have produced this new negro? Industrialism and the new age that has sprung from it. In the North it has given the negro a pivot. In the South, with its slow but steady infiltration, it is annihilating the "good nigger." Cooperative enterprise finds the negro one of its parts. In strikes the negro cannot desert the white man, nor the white man the negro. A sense of equality inevitably ripens. Economics weaken race rationalizations. The labor movement, to protect itself and secure effectiveness of organization, must construct itself upon a class and not a color or race plane. The white man and the negro are forced to adopt a class and not a race consciousness.

How has the new negro expressed himself? A few comparisons will answer the question in satisfactory and vivid manner. Intelligence depends upon education. Let us consider the matter of education. First, let us look at the data in reference to illiteracy in the United States. In 1920 there were 4,431,905 persons 10 years of age and over in the United States who were illiterate. Of this number 3,087,744 or 62.6 per cent. were white and 1,842,161 or 37.4 per cent. were negroes. In 1880 there had been 3,320,878 illiterates among the negroes, tantamount to a percentage of 70. To pass from illiteracy to literacy, we discover that in 1924 alone, 675 negroes received the Bachelor of Arts degree and that the total number of negro college graduates is now about 10,000. Twenty-nine negroes have won the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from standard American universities, and sixty negroes have been elected to the Phi Beta Kappa. Immediately following the Civil War the negro was engaged in approximately forty different business occupations; today he is engaged in over 200 kinds of business projects. There are about 100 negro banks with resources equivalent to $20,000,000, a dozen State-wide business leagues and a score of local leagues in a number of different States.

In the professions, likewise, the negro has achieved singular success. In 1900 there were 1,734 negro doctors; in 1920 there were 3,495. In 1920 there were 950 negro lawyers, two of them women, 1,109 dentists and 3,341 trained nurses. Negro physicians such as Daniel H. Williams, who was the first surgeon to perform successfully an operation on the human heart, and Algernon B. Jackson, who discovered a cure for articular rheumatism, have attained international reputations. In 1863 there were only two newspapers in the

United States published by negroes. Today there are 412 periodicals published by or for colored people; 70 religious, 85 pertaining to education, 7 magazines of general literature, 30 fraternal organs, and 220 newspapers. From 1922 to 1924 thirty books covering an opulent diversity of themes. fiction, poetry, essays, history, sociology. religion, were written by negroes, and over eighty books concerned with the negro and negro problem, covering the same diversity of topics, were written by whites. (See The Negro Year Book 1925-26). From this advance in intellectual evolution the birth of the new negro was inevitable.

In singling out causes for this new phenomenon, the new negro, the past war and the migration of negroes to the North cannot be neglected.

Negro Soldiers in France

During the war over 500,000 negroes were drafted, and 200,000 of these were disembarked in France. The effect of this new experience was acute and profound. In the service the negro soldier received the same pay as the white, and in France his contact with Europeans was exceptionally free of prejudice and oppression. He returned to America inspired with new zeal and aspiration. Equality once tasted, if but fragmentarily and for a moment, fired him with a desire for its perpetuation. The hope for a new life was transformed from a vain chimera into a vivid, palpitating reality.

Driven by economic circumstance, the negro migrations to the north have provided extraordinarily illuminating material for the sociologist. The old belief that it was persecution which hastened the negroes from their Southern hovels to Northern ghettoes was decisively exploded by a recent correlation made between Southern counties in which lynchings had occurred during the thirty-year period 1888-1918, and the migration to and from the counties. (See Charles Johnson's article on The Negro Migrations in The Modern Quarterly, Vol. II, No. 4. page 314, which presents the most valuable study of this migration problem that has been made). For instance. in Jasper County, Ga., where nine lynchings were effected, the greatest number for any county of the State in thirty years, the negro population increased between 1890-1920, while the white population during 1900-10 actually decreased. In Harrison County, Texas, which has the largest number of lynchings (16) of any county in the State, the negro population increased from 15,544 to 15,639. In other words, lynching, the most severe and flagrant form of persecution, does not depopulate communities of their negro inhabitants. The economic disadvantages of the South, and from these flowing a score of social handicaps, and the economic advantages of the North, and from them flowing a score of social privileges, were the fundamental causes of this epochal sweep of dark peoples from Southern to Northern latitudes.

We have now described the conditions that made the new negro, the vicissitudes of circumstance that infused him with a new outlook and spirit, a new determination and resolve. We have also indicated the cultural advance that he has made in many fields of endeavor. The question now arises, how does the new negro actually express himself in art and intellectuality—in what word patterns, what substance?

The philosophy of the negro after the Civil War was crystallized in the personality and work of Booker T. Washington. Washington represented a "transitional" attitude, a "transitional" ethic. He appreciated the value and significance of compromise. He was subtle if evasive. Compromise in order to construct is a motto that can be employed in description of the guiding motive of his work. To exalt the dignity of labor was one of his aims. The negro had endeavored to begin at the top instead of at the bottom, and as a result, according to Booker Washington, failure was inevitable. The process would have to be righted. reversed. The negro had first to learn the science of carpentry before he could acquire the science of politics. The work of the artisan after all was at the very basis of society. A skilled mechanic was more important than an unskilled politician. Booker T. Washington, therefore, had stood for the industrial education of the negro. Tuskegee Institute is

symbolic of his ambition. One might without exaggeration characterize his attitude as passive. He advocated neither force nor resistance. The struggle as he purposed and planned it was not so much one for equality as it was for economic adjustment. "In all things that are purely social we (the two races, white and black) can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." In reality he was more of a tactician than a social philosopher.

The organization of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in New York in 1909 marked a revolutionary change in attitude that was a direct harbinger of the new negro. Time had come for the negroes to forsake the passivity that had been recommended to them and preached with such emphasis by Booker Washington. It was time for a declaration of human rights. It was Burghardt Du Bois who sounded the tocsin of this revolt. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was to achieve:

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> An organization so effective and so powerful that when discrimination and injustice touched one negro, it would touch 12,000,000. We have not got this yet, but we have taken a great step toward it. We have dreamed, too, of an organization that would work ceaselessly to make Americans know that the so-called "Negro Problem" is simply one phase of the vaster problem of democracy in America, and that those who wish freedom and justice for their country must wish it for every black citizen. This is the great and insistent message of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Today, as an effect of these causes and movements, the new negro is no longer a promise but an actuality. His passivity is transformed into an intellectual resistance. Individual isolation has been forsaken for racial cooperation. The new negro admits no shame as to his biological origin, his social culture, but often in alluding to them becomes guilty of an exaggerated and sentimental poetic. In literature we discover this new negro attaining dynamic expression. Where hitherto the negro had been painted by others, he now paints himself. In this sense the new negro in art and literature is an independent creator.

To the sadness and humor of his race Paul Laurence Dunbar gave form as enticing and romantic as the love lyrics of a medieval minstrel. He humanized the measured manner and stilted form of Phyllis Wheatley's eighteenth century verse, freed it of affectation and infused it with spontaneity and charm. Today a whole new school is stretching beyond Dunbar in philosophic and poetic vision. Claude McKay, in parts of "Harlem Shadows," has risen from the sentimental to the splendid. A radical, McKay, unlike most of his confrères, has escaped somewhat the sense of race consciousness through his adoption of class consciousness. McKay is not a great poet, scarcely a significant minor; his work seldom soars to the magnificent, but seldom descends to the mediocre. He is a promise, however, of the rich genius of the negro soul. James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Fenton Johnson, and W. P. Hill have all broken from the paths of the poetaster, but none, not even Dunbar or McKay, has achieved the striking novelty of figure and infectious beauty of rhythm that characterize the finer products of Countee Cullen's pen. Cullen's poetry does not possess impeccable finish or insurpassable genius. As the creation of a young man, nevertheless, it is abundantly promising, vividly persuasive—a brilliant potential.

In prose literature the new negro also has advanced. Charles Chestnutt in "The

Conjure Woman," Walter White in "The Fire in the Flint" and Jessie Fauset in "There is Confusion" have given expression to the new spirit of the negro. This fiction, particularly the two novels, is guilty of a sentimentality of style and approach from which the negro has yet entirely to escape. The new negro in prose literature as well as in poetry is just bursting the mental bonds of adolescence. A story such as John Mattheus's "Fog," which won first prize in the short story contest of 1925 conducted by Opportunity, will illustrate this fact in varied and vivid detail. The story is one of immediate interest and appeal, but in its narration there are the unevenness of tone, the tendency to grandiloquence of figure and extravagance of comparison, the pathetic fallacies in perpetual parade, the faintness of feature derived from an undeveloped introspectiveness that are all characteristic of immaturity of literary composition. Few negro novelists and raconteurs have not succumbed to these extremities of exaggeration. There is only one signal exception—Jean Toomer. Toomer can write of simple things with subtlety, of little things with skill. His genre is the delicate, the precious prettinesses of life, the soft, poetic regrets, the purple nuances of fleeting, futile passions. Jean Toomer is the Lafcadio Hearn of negro literature. He has beautified the trivial, ensnared the elusive. In his work an artistic objectivity is to be discerned.

The sentimentality of the negro is a quick and inevitable outgrowth of his spirituality of attitude, his other-worldly vision. Slavery bred despair. Life could offer neither palliative nor aspiration. The negro turned to another world with the gesture of a falling warrior. It was his only escape. His religion fed upon the promise of a paradise, an other-worldly utopia. A spiritual mania was created. With the passing of slavery, however, this consuming spirituality did not completely pass. It still remains, a vestige that scarcely has begun to wither. It has handicapped the negro in his attempt to adjust himself to his new situation in society. Burghardt Du Bois is a dynamic exemplar of this tendency in the negro movement. A brilliant mind, combining an inclination for the scientific with an excited affection for the poetic, Du Bois is the champion propagandist of his people. He is more the leader, however, than the sociologist, more the agitator than the scientist. His service has been great, but its significance belongs now more to the past than to the future.

Today, with the coming of the new negro, a result of modern society, this spirituality and sentimentality are growing obsolescent. Into philosophy and sociology the new negro is eager to introduce an impartiality and objectivity that were uncommon to his fellow predecessors. The negro in society is not to be sentimentalized, but his conditions examined, his achievements objectively measured, his capacity recorded, his potentiality evaluated. In the work of Charles S. Johnson, Abram L. Harris Jr. and Alain Locke this new attitude has received vivid and convincing expression. Charles S. Johnson, editor of Opportunity, one of the leading negro magazines in the country, is the most cautious, canny and competent of contemporary negro sociologists. His work on "The Negro in Chicago" is sound and constructive. It is uninflammatory and unbiased. Abram L. Harris Jr., who is the only negro sociologist to take a definite and deliberate stand in defense of historical materialism, is one of the most brilliant minds in the new negro movement. His analysis of the negro migrations is profound and his insight into the relationship between the negro and radical economics, the nature of modern society and the new negro, is exceptionally acute and comprehensive. To Alain Locke goes the credit of collecting a large part of the recent work of the negro into the volume, just published, aptly entitled "The New Negro"—a pioneer achievement the importance of which can scarcely be exaggerated. In his work in The Survey Graphic, Mr. Locke brought the work of the new negro before the American public in a more striking way than had ever been attempted before.

The new negro already has become a force in contemporary thought. It is no vague and inflated optimism to prophesy that by tomorrow this force will be translated into a power commensurate with the increasing genius of the race.