

A New Race

THE AMERICAN NEGRO

By Melville J. Herskovits
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Reviewed by
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"THE AMERICAN NEGRO" throws new and unexpected light on an obscure problem generally solved from conviction based on race or prejudice or ignored as of no consequence. But no student of American politics or sociology, no student of biology or eugenics, no "fan" for innate Nordic supremacy, nor any one interested in any phase of any race or culture question can afford to overlook this book.

The author, now associate professor of anthropology in Northwestern University, trained under Franz Boaz, put nearly five years into trying to find out what the American Negro is and why. He made physical examinations of thousands of Negroes in Washington and in Harlem.

As I have intimated, "The American Negro" is primarily a study. Its chief and great value lies in the fact that it is a real study pursued in a strictly scientific manner. It is a model of its kind. We need not here concern ourselves with Professor Herskovits's method, but some of his findings have such general interest that they deserve notice.

First, on the physical or racial side. The American Negro, mixture as he is of the three great primary races—white, Negro and Mongoloid (Indian)—is neither white, Negro nor Indian, neither all of them nor any of them, but a new race, a race that has come into being since the first Negroes were landed on American shores in 1619. What constitutes a "race"? There is no hard and fast line, but judged by amount of variability in physical type Herskovits finds that the new Negro must be rated as a race, for there is less variability in it than in whites, blacks or Indians. In other words, the term "Negro" as it is applied to him to-day, is a purely sociological term; "American Negro," on the other hand, has biologic significance.

He is distinctive among human beings. Varied though American Negroes may seem to our untrained eyes, when we actually test the extent of this variation we find that it is no greater than that found among any of the so-called "pure races" from which they have come.

Chapter V—"His Significance for the

Study of Race"—is especially recommended to those interested in race problems from any point of view whatsoever. It, indeed, "furnishes a dramatic illustration of how little we are able to define a word that has played such an important rôle in our political and social life."

Herskovits's outstanding contribution to our knowledge of the Negro on the cultural side is in showing how skin color has become emotionally charged. We thereby get an insight into the evolution of morals. Race consciousness in the new Negro has reached the point where kinky hair is "bad" and comparatively straight hair "good." The "best" families in any good Negro community are not the "blacks," but the "browns," "high-browns," "high-yellows," "ginger-browns," "fair," "fair-browns," "reds," "pinks," "cream-colored" and "bronze."

Professor Herskovits was astonished to find that it was difficult for a dark man to "make" a Negro Greek letter fraternity. Obviously, the woman of Negroid color and features has even less opportunity for social distinction in Negro circles. As a result, selective mating is going on in Negro populations. In 56 per cent of the particular families investigated Herskovits found that the mother was lighter than the father. What happens to the very light-colored men? They "pass" over into the white group. A study of the 1920 census showed that while there were 1,018 men for every thousand dark women Negroes, there were only 886 men for every thousand women of the light-colored. As one Negro woman said: "Of course, a man wants to marry a lighter woman. Doesn't he want his children to be lighter than he is, and doesn't he want to lift up the race?" In other words, that colored woman looks upon the more colored as a Nordic looks upon the south European immigrant.

It is interesting to note how in another respect the new Negro reacts to the prevalent economic pattern. The wives of business men, professional men, foremen, minor officials in government service, ministers and the like, do no work at all; less than half the wives of Pullman porters, waiters, red caps and skilled workmen work. Not until we reach such ranks as day laborers and factory hands do we find the proportion of wives at work greater than those who do not work. The number of children in the family, so far as Herskovits could find, has nothing to do with the matter. If the Negro husband can support his family, the Negro woman sees no more reason why she should work than does the white woman in similar circumstances—and she doesn't.



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