

The Myth of "The New Negro"

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"The new Negro," they call him. He is young, sometimes less than 21, bright-eyed and serious without being solemn, and one or two news commentators have been dared to call him "handsome", or "good-looking", or "clean-cut". In any case, adjectives have been used to describe him which—a scant generation ago—would never have seen the light of print. "The new Negro." A new alliterative phrase.

And a new illusion, really. In America the truth about Negroes must never be simply faced. A new myth must rise up on the grave of an old one. There is something at the root of our racial alienation so unendurably fierce and terrible that our reason—in its own defense—averts its eyes from the horror.

Is there indeed, a "new Negro?" To say that he exists is to imply that his qualities—bravery, determination, courage, enlightenment—were absent in "the old Negro." And to make that implication is to slander anew generations of Negroes who, long



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dead or dying or merely weary and still valiantly struggling, have already borne enough degradation to last the race through eternity.

It is not possible to know when the legend of "the new Negro" began. Who knows for certain the moment of inception of any legend? But it may have achieved respectability one

morning a few years back in the good gray New York Times.

An article, one of those brief personality sketches of individuals thrust suddenly to the forefront of portentous events, appeared in the first news section. "A Passive Insister," the headline read. And under it the name, "Ezell Blair, Jr. There was a portrait of Mr. Blair, showing a touchingly attractive young man of 18, brighteyed, confident and half-smiling, the kind of youth any sane town, state or nation would be proud to call its own.

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THE NEWS FEATURE was datelined Greensboro, N.C., March 26, 1960, and Mr. Blair was being written about as a leader and—to give whatever credit is due—as the symbol of those astonishing students suddenly launched on a contagious campaign of determined disruption of the so-called traditions of the South.

According to the Times story, it was young Mr. Blair who—fashioning the techniques of Mohandas K. Ghandi into an assault on racial segregation—had initiated the now historic wave of sit-down demonstrations at chain store lunch counters.

The Times did not use the phrase, as so many other periodicals did and do now, but it was there, implicit in the overall import of the story and in the choice of quotes from Ezell Blair—"the new Negro."

"As new Negroes we can speak up loudly now and without fear of economic reprisals," one quote went. "As college students, we have no jobs from which to be fired by people who don't like to see us assert ourselves."

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IT MAY VERY WELL be true that Ezell Blair and his fellow sit-inners called themselves "new Negroes." However, it is unlikely that these young people, in the first flush of their crusade, bothered to describe themselves with philosophical tags. Their acts of defiance had more spontaneity and innocence than that. It seems more probably that their adoption of the term—if, indeed, they adopted it—came later, on the tail of the realization of the magnitude of the thing they had set in motion and after the press (which has a peculiar compulsion to label) began to interpret the implications of the movement.

Whatever the press or the social analysts said, however, the young sit-inners knew very well that there was nothing "new" about the impulses which spurred their actions. They had enough familiarity with the emotions of their parents and the headlines of their weekly newspapers to know that there is nothing "new" about the Negro's hunger for genuine freedom and the long abortive struggle to acquire it.

They knew that their parents, while working and planning like parents everywhere for a better life for their families, had at the same time been obsessed with the problem of their imposed inferior status. "My mother always told me that I'm equal to other people," young Blair was quoted in the Times.

This simple assurance, which would seem unnecessary and even strange coming from a white parent, is absolutely vital for Negro parents. Poised uncomfortably in a society which deliberately keeps them at arm's length, it becomes imperative not only that they attempt to explain the alienation but also that they deny its implications.

And the young Negroes of the South knew from reading the weekly newspapers which cater to them, that there was nothing "new" about the little middle-aged Montgomery seamstress who—in a moment of supreme weariness—defied all the power and terror of racist rule by refusing to surrender her seat on a bus to a white man. There was nothing "new" about Rosa Parks. Negro men and women have been defying the degrading laws of the South for as long as such laws have existed, and they have gone, as they knew they must go at the moment when they decided that now, at last, they had borne all they could bear, to the jails or to the graveyards.

It is not necessary to delve so far back into history for proof of this. The pages of the Michigan Chronicle or the Pittsburgh Courier or the Afro-American provide more than ade-

quate documentation of the long lists of Negroes who have been jailed or beaten or murdered because their dignity as human beings, crushed to the dust, suddenly rebelled, and they knew, then and there, that they had to stand up at last as men and women or else for the rest of their lives exist in their own eyes as NOTHING.

If the acts of defiance of Ezell Blair and his fellow students are not "new," then what is new? The answer to that is simpler than most Americans want to admit.

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WHAT IS "NEW" is the combination of forces and influences which, in the years since World War II, have made it impossible for the white South to play its old horror game with the same impunity as before. And, more shattering than the presence of these forces and influences, is the fact that every truly significant one of them had its point of origin outside this country.

The real impact of this truth has not yet begun to dawn on America, but it eventually will. The so-called emergence of Negroes more or less into the mainstream of American life is a by-product of the war, the sweep of international communism, and the

rise of nationalism in Asia and Africa. Even the monumental study, An American Dilemma, which is both credited and blamed with having influenced the Supreme Court in ruling against "separate but equal" schools, was written by a foreigner.

To question the concept of the "new Negro" is not to attempt to rob Mr. Blair and his generation of credit for their courage, their determination, their faith and ultimately, their achievement. They have done their nation an incalculable service. Rather, it is an effort to keep the racial picture in focus, to ward off the debunkers and the deriders, to confute the myth-makers. For, inherent in the idea of a "new Negro" willing to do battle for his rights is the wholly untenable proposition that the "old" Negro lacked both the valor and the vision.

The plain truth is that there is no "new Negro." There is a new generation of Negroes springing to maturity in a world which has at last challenged the concept of a superior race and the power of those who believe in it. And it is this fact—the fact of a new world—which alone explains the relative success of the new generation of Negroes in their drive for the semblance of equality in their own country.