

THE CASE OF A MINORITY: PREDICAMENT OF A MAJORITY

By DR. ALAIN LOCKE

NOT SINCE the Civil war has the Negro's cause been of greater national significance and never has it been of anything approaching such international significance as today.

It is the old story of what used to be called "poetic justice" and "moral victory," but what today we would more realistically interpret as the principle of accumulative effect. The policies of which the Negro has for generations been the victim, along with other minorities, have reached a stage of acute historical self-contradiction, and as in the decade of 1850, the issues involved cannot any longer be temporized and postponed.

There are, it is true, possibilities of stalemate and compromise in both the political and the economic aspects of the world conflict, but on the issue with which the Negro is most deeply concerned, namely the relative status of white and non-white peoples, which in last analysis is a moral and cultural matter, the die seems to be cast by the present world crisis.

Either it is to be a world in which many, if not most of the previously dominant nations and peoples themselves become slaves and exploited underlings or it must become a world in which all peoples stand on an approximate parity and are, even though economically and politically interdependent, spiritually and socially free. In the large, as I see it, this is the basic issue of World War II, if we must so name it, though really it is World War I, with a bitter prologue which was misnamed World War I.

The inconsistencies of racism and economic imperialism were in 1914-18 tuning up for their final showdown in 1939 to dear knows what terminal date. That the conflagration was superficially settled by the truce of Versailles simply was due to the fact that the rivalries of imperialistic dominance had not yet precipi-

tated a conflict of complete world scope. But now, Africa, Asia, Oceanica are as ablaze with the inevitable showdown as previously in 1918 half the world.

Almost a Parallel

In this blazing but illuminating context, we must briefly take stock of the Negro's situation. Internally it is not so much a minority case any longer as it is a national predicament. As before in 1860, the time has come when the fate of the majority becomes involved in the fate of the minority, a moral logic that few saw until it was ripe for a national crisis. Abraham Lincoln foresaw it when he said: "This country can no longer endure half slave and half free; either it will become all slave or all free."

Today's predicament is not the same, it is true, but it is an almost exact parallel; for the present alternative is whether America shall come out of the stress of this war truly and consistently democratic or revert to an equally consistent fascism of its own.

There are reactionary forces already shortsightedly and even blindly posing that issue, as did the reactionary South two generations ago.



Dr. Alain Locke

These are the persons and interests, North and South this time, who believe it is still possible to be half-way democratic in the face of the dilemmas of today. Not only in the war emergency is greater inner consistency necessary, it will be all the more necessary in the stresses of war reconstruction.

This time the social upheaval is too widespread to subside with the cessation of hostilities, and the difficulties of the situation will force a clear-cut resolution of the basic issues involved. It thus behooves every minority person to see the whole situation clearly rather than merely in terms of his own problem segment, and to set the minority cause in the perspective of the best solutions for the majority cause. Difficult as this will be on our side, it will barely match the difficulties of the best majority minds, who must also now learn to see the issues involved in the so-called race problem as the critical and crucial issues of democracy as a whole.

The March-on-Washington movement puts this in a pithy slogan when it says: "Winning democracy for the Negro means winning the war for democracy." In the larger, deeper sense this is literally true, for the Negro is the test case for the internal health and soundness of our domestic democracy.

Parity of Peoples

Externally, the situation which we must still call "racial" for want of a better name, is also uniquely critical. It is not as many racialists think a war of races or a color war. But since color differentials correspond so largely to those of imperial and colonial, dominant and subject peoples, there is essential truth in saying that the parity of peoples in the main moral issue of the world conflict.

This involves a grand generalization of the core issue of the race problem, and it is ironical but logical that just as world colonization produced our modern world of nationalist imperialism, so the final civil war of that system and its probable self-liquidation involves a retraction of

the theory and practice of national and racial inequality. Germany and Japan in that sense have merely precipitated the inner contradictions of the whole system, as the recalcitrant South precipitated the contradictions of the slave economy in a national economy that was basically a free industrial wage economy.

And so, while there is no direct political alignment of the American Negro question with, let us say, the cause of a Free India or an Africa liberated from colonial suppression and exploitation or a federated self-governing Caribbean, morally there is the closest of connections. But there is a moral linkage nevertheless, for all these disabilities are part of the same pattern of group relations, and the attitudes and rationalizations involved are cut from the same psychological cloth.

Any vital reversal of such policies will have broad repercussions elsewhere, and while it is too much to hope that all the subject peoples of the earth will gain freedom simultaneously, there is little doubt that what happens to one will have profound effect upon the others. If we look at history broadly we see a similar connection between the abolition of the slave trade which had to be a crusade on a world scale, and the subsequent emancipation moves in the various colonial areas—a relay of consequences which to many seemed unconnected. Similarly, I take it, if democracy wins in this world conflict, or chooses to win, it must ground itself on the consistent practice of its own professions and carry through its principles to the last letter of "Freedom, Equality, (and, let us note) Fraternity."

ALAIN LOCKE is professor of philosophy at Howard university, Washington, D. C., and considered the foremost authority on contemporary Negro art and culture. He is a Phi Beta Kappa and was the first Negro ever to receive a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford university, England. He obtained his doctor of philosophy degree from Harvard in 1918. He is the author of a number of books on the Negro, best known being "The New Negro" and "The Negro in Art."