THE PARADOX OF NEGRO PROGRESS

The progress made by the freedmen since their emancipation has been a subject of national, if not universal, comment; and in spite of the many indignities which the nation is wont to heap upon her black citizens, the country has not hesitated to give sanction to their progress, because it seems so apparent that to deny it would be more disgraceful,—certainly more out of tune—than a lynching in a backward section of the country. Many writers have ventured with success to trace and to record this material and intellectual advancement of the Negro. Some have meticulously pointed out the increase in the possession and management of farms in the rural Southland; others have spoken astoundingly of the rapid acquisition of real estate and business enterprises in the urban North with the influx of the migrants; still others have acknowledged a Negro art and literature, and a Negro intelligentsia. Much comment has been aroused by the recent rise of the Negro in American politics with the election of the first one of the race to Congress since Reconstruction days. But just what does this progress—this succession of recognized vicissitudes—mean in the life of the Negro? What does it ultimately hold for him? From a racial perspective is there anything fundamental about it? or, is it illusive or paradoxical?

We may determine or attempt an answer to the question as to whether or not Negro progress is basic by considering those elements which are fundamental in all group
advancement. From the very beginning of mankind and the origin of a society, even in its crudest state, the chief means of group preservation, or group advancement, has been education. Training that developed in the individual the ability necessary to get along—to function—in the society of which he was a part. In early primitive societies the aim in educating youth was to preserve the existing state of the society. Since the social development of those days was of a stable rather than an evolutionary nature, this was all that was necessary. There were, of course, methods, which were suited to attaining the desired end in this education. In the case of the Greek State, Sparta, the aim of education was different because the society was different. This state was situated among hostile states in a barbarous age. To preserve or to promote their society meant warfare. Sparta needed military protection; education, therefore, was directed toward the production of a finished soldier. In the Greek state, Athens, during the Age of Pericles, Grecian society took on a different aspect from that of the State of Sparta, or from what it had been in Athens itself before this time. Society became less hostile,—less given to warfare; and at the same time it became more complex in its organization. Citizenship or service to the state became the aim of education. All educational methods, then, had as their aim the producing of the man of virtue or the man of knowledge. It was in Athens, during this period that guiding principles of education were formulated through the opposition of the philosophers and the sophists, of the individual and the state.

These principles or educational theories were transmitted to the Romans through the conquests of Alexander, where they became the basis of Roman education. Education after the advent of Christ, whether ecclesiastical or secular, whether during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance period, or late modern times, has had the primary aim of fitting individuals to their environment, and making them a functioning element in their particular society. Or, as Dr. Carter G.
Woodson phrases it, "The only education worthwhile is that which reacts on one's life in his peculiar situation." In this way all education aims to extend or to elevate the group or society for which it is contrived by producing in its educated people a consciousness of their existence in the society as well as a motive for action. It seems that this is the secret of the worthwhile contributions to civilization. It is at once, undoubtedly, true of the Greeks, the Romans, the Hebrews, the Italians, the French, the Germans, the English, and the Americans. Being generally true, it must become true of the Negro, if as a race he is to make any lasting contribution to the present trend of civilization.

An examination of the ideal of Negro education will reveal two aims—the theoretical and the practical. The first is set forth in the theories of the training of Negro youth, as they are formulated by outstanding leaders of the race, chiefly Woodson, the historian, and DuBois, the editor. Woodson's ideal is expressed thus: "A youth should not be educated away from his environment but trained to lay a foundation for the future in his present situation out of which he may emerge into something above and beyond his beginning." DuBois also believes that for the young Negro to accomplish his best his situation, his relation to the American nation, must be early and frankly stated—not alluded to or passed over. But the practice in Negro education is quite adverse to these expressed theories.

While it is agreed that the training of Negro youth should aim at producing within him a consciousness of his being and a motive for action in his society, race consciousness is by no means at the basis of Negro education. The argument may arise that such an aim is impossible of carrying out on account of the fact that the Negro is placed in a "bi-society"—national and racial. But will devotion to one's race abridge one's patriotism to his country? When rightfully directed, racial pride and respect are means by which true national or universal service is stimulated.

The fact that there has developed a Negro art or a Negro
literature is an argument for Negro consciousness. Of course, if left to the Negro there would be none of this—all would be American. Stating it in a different way, we should say that if the Negro had been a subject in Roman society, there would have been no race problem, for the Roman government would have taken advantage of his willingness to become a citizen of the empire. The thing which impedes the advancement of the Negro, however, is that his education has a national aim while his society is generally limited to his race. This is a contradiction in educational aim and in educational practice.

In the Negro institutions of the South one would naturally think that the tendency is Negro. It is lightly so. But the consciousness of the young Negro's being and his motive of being and for action in his racial society is only vaguely stated or alluded to. Of course, the cause of this deficiency is to be found in the censorship which white patronage puts on those institutions, rather than to the attitude of the teachers. White patrons were so sympathetic with Booker T. Washington's advocacy of industrial education that they were wont to overlook the fact that the Negro possessed a head and heart to be trained as well as two hands, and that until these two important H's were cultivated that the Negro would not be of value as an element in or out of his society. Consequently these patrons of Negro education supported only those schools which restricted themselves to industrial training. It was largely due to the work of Dr. DuBois in his opposition to Mr. Washington's industrial program that Negro higher education was popularized, and that the humanities were presented to the Negro student instead of agriculture. But even in this higher education in the Southern institutions there is neither a frank and direct statement of Negro education nor an effective program for accomplishing its aim. The student is not educated to what his society justly demands of him. There is but one effective way of inducing the Negro youth to aspire to higher things, and this by giving him a thorough knowledge of the background of his race and its achievements.
Dr. Woodson, in addressing an audience, once said that in order that the young Negro may succeed the history of his race must be kept before him. Again he voices the same idea in these words: "Those who have no records of what their ancestors have accomplished, lose the inspiration which comes from teaching biography and history."

Would anyone doubt or dispute this? How many tales of ancestral gallantry have been moulded upon the young white American’s brain that he might be encouraged to do? If this, along with the theory of his superior creation, has been necessary to excite action in white youth in America with all the genial encouragement of a sympathetic nation, so much more necessary will it be for the youth who generally meets with discouragement from a nation hostile to him.

However, there is some hope in the Southern institutions due to the recent progress which has been made along the line of racial culture. The Negro in Our History, the authentic history textbook of the race, is taught in some of the secondary schools of the Southern States. But apparently the race element in the curriculum is yet very inadequate. There is no systematized study of Negro art and literature; but, at least, the suggestion seems to be getting some attention. In this respect, Negro education in the South may be assuming a new aspect.

Turning now to the proposition of educating the Negro in the North, we find a situation vastly different from that in the South. Negroes, being generally admitted to the same schools as Caucasians, get the same kind of education. Although the Negro student may be considered on an equal basis with the white in the class room, he is not in the least an equal, for he is not considered and treated as such when he approaches his place in society for which his training has fitted him. He finds that he is limited in his choice to a Negro world—to a Negro society—and the great tragedy is not the limitation, but that he has been taught nothing of the society in which he must now work. Under such circumstances he can but be a failure.
In the Northern institutions the subject of the Negro is entirely excluded from the curriculum; no textbooks of the history or of the literature of the race are used, and the Negro is mentioned in other books only for condemnation. Consequently, the young Negro student goes through the elementary school, the secondary, and in many instances, the university, without having the vaguest idea of the accomplishments of his race.

Dean William Pickens, a graduate of Yale, in addressing an audience on the subject "The Contribution of the Negro to the United States," said, "I was twenty-one years old before I knew that Negroes fought in the American Revolution. There were over three thousand with Washington in that struggle," he added, "but I didn't learn this at Yale."

Naturally, the Negro student who knows nothing of the development of his race, has a propensity to feel that it is a mere blank—nothing there to be mentioned with pride. He would therefore forget or ignore the appellation Negro or black or colored in white society; just as if by ignoring it the dominant race will forget who the Negroes are, and in this way all racial maladies will pass away.

In high school I received from the majority of my United States History classmates, who were colored, many fervent protests because I dared to differ from the author of the text in some of his statements on the Negro and the slavery question. Of course, they did not mean anything ill toward me; they simply thought that I was getting the race "in bad" in the estimation of the teacher for trying to refute the author. To some young Negroes, especially those born in the North, those who have never been South, who know nothing of the race problem as it exists there, or even as it is in the North, the mere mentioning of the word Negro or anything which indicates their race, brings a strong feeling of disgust over them, it matters not how sublime an implication one might tend to place upon it.

I remember, once in a high school in which the student body was colored and the faculty mixed—more white than
colored—upon a certain occasion Dr. Alain Locke was ad-
dressing the student body on “The Young Negro Poets and
eir Works.” He was giving some readings from Cullen,
Hughes, and McKay. I was delighted and was thinking that
the entire student body must have been enjoying it, when
a girl behind me got restless and began twisting violently
in her seat, and in an outspoken tone was saying, “I wish
he’d shut up. Just talking about Negro. We are all alike.”

There are many young Northerners of the race, who
belong to this class. They dislike everything Negro—Negro
scholars, Negro literature, Negro art—because they don’t
know anything about them or the motives which actuated
them or the circumstance out of which they grew.

In this attitude of the Negro student in the North lies
the paradox of Negro intellectual advancement. It is the
thing which makes the South, though handicapped in facili-
ties and backward on account of other circumstances, seem
from a racial point of view, more fundamentally progressive
than the North with all the facilities and opportunities nec-
essary for success.

What here is paradoxical? In the first place, it is clearly
evident, with this motive predominant in the mind of Negro
youth, that a few Negro scholars are producing Negro litera-
ture, a few Negro artists Negro art, with the people in
whose interest they are produced wholly ignorant, unap-
preciative, and unresponsive to them. How long will they
continue to create under such conditions? How much of their
work will be immortalized or commercialized? Homer may
have wandered about Athens singing his classic free of
charge, but this is not likely to happen again today. Dr.
Carter G. Woodson, a poor colored lad from a West Vir-
ginia coal mine, received his education in History at Har-
vard. He then turned to use his knowledge in the intellectual
development of his race. He has written a text book of race
history, The Negro in Our History, which is authentic and is
used in certain secondary schools of nearly one-half the
states of the Union. He has founded the Association for the
Study of Negro Life and History, which publishes as its organ a quarterly, The Journal of Negro History, which has now reached its sixteenth volume, in which form it constitutes the only encyclopedia of the race. His works have been acknowledged by the leading universities and are found in all large libraries. Yet Negroes in the North have made practically no effort to have Negro History taught in the secondary schools, although the author himself constantly admonishes them to do this very thing.

Then again Dr. William E. B. DuBois, an alumnus of Harvard and Berlin, has devoted and is devoting his life to making his youthful dreams a realization. As the editor of the Crisis, a magazine which gives the record of the darker races, and as the author of several books bearing on the race he has shown a vision of the intellectual aspirations of the Negro. He once truthfully and touchingly said of himself, "I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the rights of black folk to love and enjoy." But when he attempts to conduct an annual Negro Essay, Poetry, Story and Art contest, although the cash prizes offered, seemingly, were reason enough for an energetic effort, he must finally admit the failure of his endeavor in these words:

It seems certain that the young Negro writers and thinkers of today are not applying their minds to the economic problem of their race. And yet that problem is, and, for many generations must be, the central problem of our existence and survival. How are we going to bring the attention of the young to the importance of that problem? Manifestly prizes for writing are not effective.

There is no doubt that if all Negroes capable of entering such a contest had read the many beautiful and inspiring passages by the author of the Soul of Black Folk, such a failure and such an acknowledgment would hardly have been possible.

Aside from these apparent contradictions could any better motive be offered to inspire the Negro than the struggles
of his race? Offer him the American ideals and you offer him ideals impossible of immediate attainment; hence disillusion and disappointment. Offer him the racial ideal, and you offer him a life of service in a society pregnant with opportunities. And after all is not this the logical way? Can one serve his community before he has learned to serve his family? Can one serve his country before he understands and can render service to his oppressed and downtrodden race?

The progress of the American Negro is, in a sense, measured by the impression which he makes—the impression which he makes in his dealings with his fellows as well as that when he is brought into contact with white people. If this impression be intelligent, benignant, respectful, and generous, it will do more—it has done more—than any legislation toward race relations. What is the race problem after all? Primarily, it is a lack of respect of recognition of the white race for the black. And it may be that this is because the black race does not respect itself. Can the Negro respect himself without knowing himself? The old Greek philosophy "Know thyself" holds much for the Negro.

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Considering the relation of education to economics, one could draw his conclusion as to the tendency of Negro material progress. This relation of knowledge and wealth was stated by Socrates, saying, "I tell you that virtue does not come from money, but from virtue comes money, and all other good things to man both to the individual and the state." Nothing expresses better the effectiveness of the education of a group than the use which it makes of its wealth in the economic emancipation of its society. In this respect the Negro has made little or no progress. Seemingly, he has not learned that his economic well-being is not to be found in the number of dollars he can spend lavishly, but in the dollars that he can capitalize in his own society. Wherever this has been the objective of men they have gen-
erally succeeded; but the venture has not been of a huge, or even telling nature. The tendency in Negro economy is to spend fast and quickly, invest lavishly in those things, which though not necessary, will nevertheless make a great display. This is the chief motive and trend of Negro material progress.

The economic well-being of the Negro is predicated upon the sentiment of the white man, which is the sentiment of the nation. And we find that the material possession of American goods by the Negro has, in many instances, played havoc with the white man’s economic sentiment of the black man. Mr. Brisbane, whose columns on the front page of many of the nation’s leading daily newspapers, reach and influence many, is impressed by the sight of a Pullman Porter with his wife in a fine car in San Francisco. He immediately draws the conclusion, which he writes in his column, that Pullman Porters are becoming rich by generous tips of the passengers. Again, a very wealthy and influential lady politician, when asked to aid Negro Charities of Chicago, refused with a grunt, and exclaimed: “They ride in finer cars than I dare own.”

It is a general fallacy of white people to judge, adversely, all Negroes by one or two premature incidents. In this age to judge a group of people by the kind of apartments they dwell in or the sort of cars they ride in, is like judging the wealth of an individual by his fine clothes and jewelry when he may have them all for a ten-dollar deposit and a mortgage on his job, and tomorrow he may have nothing. But whether just or unjust, this, nevertheless, is an attitude to be reckoned with.

Whatever unfavorable conditions there are in the Negro’s economic standing due to his misuse of finance, they must be attributed to the fallacies in his education. Here as elsewhere the remote and indirect ideal has been substituted for the near and direct one, or I should have said that this ideal is transmitted from the theoretical to the practical. In the Negro business world there is no worked-out program
of financial emancipation. Although many logical minded Negro business men are agreed that such a policy is necessary, seemingly a lack of initiative prevents it from being carried out. If anything noticeable is accomplished in this direction, it will come out of an economic perturbation and not voluntarily.

The general tendency which has actuated Negro business or enterprises is wild-speculation, even selfish in motive. Some Negroes have learned to value the personal possession of the dollar above all else. I once heard a very highly educated Negro, a successful physician, say in giving his remedy for the maladies in the race problem, "All that the Negro needs to do, the thing which will count more than anything else, is the amassing of capital."

This would be the exact thing for the Negro business men to do, but business men will not amass capital without being able to see the farfetched outcome of such action, without sufficient confidence or trust in the population the business is to cater to. Negro business men do not have sufficient vision in business, nor sufficient trust of the Negro patronage; it may be that the lack of the first is due to the absence of the second. Whatever it may be, it has greatly retarded the economic progress of the Negroes.

No better examples will serve to illustrate this condition than the Negro communities in the Northern cities—Chicago and New York especially. In Chicago on the South Side, in what is known as the "Black Belt," dwells most of the Negro population of the city. In spite of the fact that the "Black Belt" boasts of banks, real estate, and manufacturing enterprises, and of several business magnates, who by their accomplishments have evoked laudatory comments from the white press, there is no doubt that the Negro business men of Chicago are unspeakably tardy to take advantage of the simplest, yet the greatest, the most lucrative, and the most promising business opportunities of their communities. This development is controlled by the Jews. They are in business communities everywhere, and Negro sections
of the country are the most lucrative for and encouraging to Hebrew business adventures. Dwellings for the Negroes, meat markets and groceries for them, amusement places for their special benefit—these the most prolific are furnished by Jewish capital with a willing and ready double return in profit from the free-hearted, light-minded, lavish-spending Negroes.

One young Jewish student, whose father operates a business among Negroes, hates Negroes because they are extravagant—because they are ignorant. If only the American Negro knew that knowledge respects knowledge, even though it is in opposition to or in conflict with knowledge, a new day would dawn for the race.

The economic aspect of Negro development in the Harlem district of New York has been even less marked than that in Chicago. In Chicago will be found Negro enterprises of all types, from a laundry to a bank, although they are not operated on a large enough scale so as to make themselves much felt in strengthening the economic fibre of the community. In Harlem, however, the people of the community are without large stores, without banks, without insurance companies, unless they are the establishments of white capital. Though sometimes insulted and mistreated in white business institutions, the black patrons go luckily on, spending freely; they are never excited to the point where they would rather save their dollars than spend them where they are not wanted—certainly not yet appreciated.

Taking a view of various races in their industrial pursuits in the cities, one will readily observe that certain races have established themselves dominantly in certain vocational lines or enterprises in which they seem to have acquired skill, or in which they seem to have been endowed to be sovereigns in that particular line of business. The Chinese dominate laundry shops and chop suey houses; the Greeks excel in the management of restaurants; the Mexicans in chili parlors; and the Italian in the manufacture of spaghetti. While the Jew is a recognized trader, he excels in
any business his skillful hands and shrewd mind undertake—often he creates new lines or pursuits. The Negro, however, excels in no particular business not because he has not the innate ability for some given work; but because he has made little effort to establish himself in the line for which he possesses special aptitude. Everybody has acknowledged that the Negro has infinite capacity for music and art, both of which in this age, have unlimited industrial possibilities due to their great demand. But the Negro has not learned the secret of monopoly and cooperative business. Seemingly his jazz and spiritual music were born with him; he is a natural comedian, and the American cannot get along without his song and his comics. Consequently, the white man—the Jew—has set about to supply this indispensability. So we have Amos 'n' Andy on the radio, moving the world. White jazz bands playing negro jazz, are luxurious and numerous, and they supply the big demand for jazz in a jazzy age, but the Negro is the real jazz thing. Negroes are entertained by this music over the radio and marvel at it—hardly recognize it—because it is different; it has been transformed from its crude state as a product of the modern revolution, but basically it is Negro-Primitive-African.

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But all these shortcomings of the Negro seem the expression of the American tendency, and his ability, his willingness, to reconcile himself to it. It means that the Negro is more national than racial, primarily, because he is trained to be that way; though there are some who would make this quality innate. It may be that it is, but circumstance and training would change it; it is not immutable.

Count Herman Keyserling says that the Negro is the most American thing in America; and that from a standpoint of human culture, the greatest contribution of America has been made by her black citizens. Andre Siegfried voices the same opinion in his work "America Comes of Age."
There is nothing wrong about the Negro being American but this: namely, that he does not get his just compensation for being such. Since his great reward must come from his racial progress, since this progress is the basis of his national advancement, it must be fundamental, or eventually it will be none at all. But somewhere has been breathed an ideal for the race—an ideal higher than the nation. It is stated thus:

What do we want? What are the things we are after? As it was phrased last night it had a certain truth; we want to be Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals.

If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color-line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful; what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars, and outtrace Cook County? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion, or what-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices?

Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your hearts that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American, because pushed aside as we have been in America there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty good hard work, the inevitable suffering that always comes with life, sacrifice and waiting, all that—but, nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, where men create, where men realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of world that we want to create for ourselves and for all America.*

While this expresses an ideal nobly conceived, it is an ideal remote from the masses of the Negro race; it is by no means the tendency in the life of the Negro in America. Indeed, the race in many large cities, has begun to do, to strive after and set as its ultimate goals, just the things

* DuBois, Criteria of Negro Art.
upon which the author effectively builds the supposition of the race's becoming rich and the fading of color line. The buying of the most powerful of motor cars and outracing Cook County, the buying of long press notices and giving rich dinners, the displaying of pomp and seeking fraternal recognition—these have actually become practices in the daily life of the Negro, and the reason he does not buy elaborate estates in exclusive places is simply because the American sentiment will not tolerate his doing this. He is making all of this the ultimate ideal of his strivings. Yet he is neither rich nor has the color line faded from before him; and with all this, the material possession of American goods the measure of greatness, there is no doubt that he has made some progress in obtaining this much desired end.

But as pronounced as Negro progress may be, it yet has a dubious, a paradoxical aspect (when its true significance to the race is viewed). Paradoxical because this advancement has not the basic principles underlying all permanent group achievements. The Negro ideal has been Americanism; for this ideal he has struggled ceaselessly; but on account of the strong adverse racial sentiment within the nation, this American ideal has been impossible of direct attainment, and seemingly, it can be gained only by the indirect method—through fundamental and worthwhile developments within the race. Since the basis of the race problem is simply a matter of appreciation and of recognition of the black race by the white, and since accomplishments are the only emblems by which recognition is obtained, it is quite evident that this direct way of fundamental racial development is the only way. When the Negro has done this, the American ideal will have been reached; but as long as he is educated away from his society, as long as he is ignorant of himself and has no direct and worthy cause to actuate his life—to give him infinite courage to struggle and to sacrifice for high ideals in an Age of Dollars—just so long as these are true, just so long will there be a race problem, just so long will Negro progress remain a paradox.

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