CHAPTER VIII

RACE PREJUDICE AS A FACTOR IN THE STATUS OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO

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It is widely believed that race prejudice has been historically and is at the present time the basic factor in the status of the American Negro. Race prejudice is assumed to be the effective factor in the Negro's subordination. It is the purpose of this paper to define the character of the relationship between prejudice toward the Negro and the position he occupies in the American social structure. The problem is to analyze the interaction, if any, between status and prejudice.

The simplest approach to this question is first to indicate in outline what the status of the Negro is, and second to analyze specifically the rôle of prejudice in the determination of the Negro's position in the American social order. Since the status of the Negro is the theme of this volume it will be treated briefly in the present chapter. Only the essential aspects of the Negro's status will be cited. The greater part of this discussion will represent an attempt to diagnose race prejudice as a factor in the status of the American Negro.

THE STATUS OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO

The status of a group, class, caste or race, may be measured by its relative advantages, rights, influence, prestige or power in a social order. The indices of status obviously vary in time and place. The status of a group in the American social order is determined by certain objective and subjective conditions. Thus, occupation, income, and wealth are important. Given what Veblen termed our pecuniary values, a relatively high average of income and wealth is necessary for position. Moreover, political power and degree of participation in the political process reflect status rating. No group lacking access to the machinery of the state or debarred from the use of the vote or other political instrumentalities ranks in American society. Again, degree of participation in the social process and the social heritage is indicative of status. Isolated groups, or groups debarred from a full and free participation in communal and social life, are by these signs rated low. Finally, the status of a group may be inferred from the "public opinion" current with reference to that group. Attitudes, beliefs, myths and sentiments prevalent concerning a group are good barometers of its standing.

THE STATUS OF THE NEGRO IN OUTLINE

The American Negro may be de-

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2 The following more or less general books on the Negro supply the basic data for the analysis of his status: James S. Allen, The Negro Question in the United States, (1936); Annuals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, The American Negro, (1928); John Dollard, Class and Caste in a Southern Town, (1937); The Chicago Commission on Race Relation, The Negro in Chicago, (1922); Charles S. Johnson, The Negro in American Civilization, (1930); Hortense Powdermaker, After Freedom, (1939); E. B. Reuter, The American Race Problem, (1938); Sterling D. Spero and Abram A. Harris, The Negro Worker, (1931). There are of course many studies of specific aspects of the Negro's problems such as those by E. F. Frazier, Arthur Raper, Paul Lewinson, Horace M. Bond, Harold F. Gosnell, and many others.

3 For an analysis of the concept of status and its variable character see Max Radin's article on "Status" in the Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, 14:379-377.
scribed as a historic, subordinate group, traditionally identified by race. Though not always a numerical minority his status has been and now is that of a minority group. Obviously, the status of the Negro varies regionally. His position in the South is more sharply defined in terms of caste than is the case in the North; and the urban Negro’s status varies from that of the rural Negro. Moreover, nowhere are all Negroes assigned absolutely the same rank. The internal distinctions of class and social type within the Negro group are recognized to some extent by the members of the dominant race. There is a kind of differential rating for the Negro upper classes. In the main, however, in spite of the variegated social composition of the Negro group, it is rated by whites as a relatively homogeneous, subordinate racial minority.

In terms of specific indices of status described, the rating of the American Negro is low. The occupational distribution and the level of income and wealth represent the material aspect of this subordination. Thus, the Negroes gainfully employed are disproportionately concentrated in the semi-skilled and unskilled occupations. There is a “Negro wage scale” in the South, and to some extent this is true in other areas. On the average, the income of the Negro family is from one-third to one-half that of white families, according to a recent study by the National Resources Committee. For example, the median annual family income for white families in the Southern rural areas was $1,100 compared with $480 for Negro families in the same areas; and in Southern cities of 2,500 population and over white families had an average annual income of $1,570 compared with $525 for Negro families. Even in the Northern cities of 100,000 population and over the average annual income of white families was $1,720 compared with $1,095 for the Negro families. It was found that in the Southern rural regions about 80 per cent of the Negro families received less than $750 a year, compared with about 28 per cent of the white families. The samples cited excluded all families on relief. Had relief families been included in their proper ratios the income differential would have been even greater, since a much higher proportion of the Negro population is destitute and dependent. The relatively small business and professional classes among Negroes have a precarious economic footing, and compared with corresponding classes within the white group, possess little wealth. With relatively little economic power in an acquisitive, capitalistic society, the Negro’s status is inevitably one of subordination.

The Negro’s economic disabilities are matched by sharp restrictions politically. Relatively disfranchised in the South, with his civil and constitutional rights recognized only to a limited degree, the Negro is somewhat

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3 It is doubtful, however, if this is true to the extent assumed by Warner in his studies. See his “American Caste and Class,” American Journal of Sociology, 42:234-237, 1936.


5 Published public assistance and relief statistics are not broken down by race. However, certain studies show a much higher ratio of relief among Negroes than whites. For example, studies made in 1933 and 1934 indicated that in urban areas the relief rate for Negroes was three times that for whites.

defenseless. Government is more an agent of exploitation and coercion than an instrument of welfare. In the North he participates more effectively in the political process, but even here his background, his economic position and the restrictive prejudices associated with the white man’s vested interests mark him as only half a man politically.  

Correlated with the economic and political restrictions imposed upon the Negro is the social and cultural isolation of this subordinate minority. The caste-like arrangements of the South which separate the races in play, school, religion, social services, and social life generally, exist as well in the North, though in a less formidable, formal, and institutionalized fashion. Everywhere equalized contacts are taboo if not in folkways, mores and law, then in prejudice and sentiment. This bi-racialism is merely the reflection of inequality of status; and of necessity means inequality of opportunity and limited use of the social resources of American society. The result is a racial minority, incompletely incorporated in the common life, isolated in a racial ghetto.

Finally, the Negro’s subordination is reflected in the “public opinion” about him. The various studies made, and common-sense observations as well, indicate conclusively that white stereotypes and opinions of the Negro are derogatory and demeaning. These attitudes and opinions represent both a reaction to the Negro’s status and a justification of his subordination.

**Race Prejudice as a Factor in Status**

We now turn to the major problem of this paper, namely, the rôle of race prejudice in the status and problems of the Negro. Did time and space permit, a more or less extended analysis of race prejudice would be relevant. Under the circumstances a brief general note as to the character of race prejudice will suffice. Its fundamental features will emerge, it is hoped, in the course of the discussion of the interrelation between race prejudice and the status of the Negro.

**The Character of Race Prejudice**

Race prejudice may be defined simply as a socially acquired tendency to react with varying degrees of aversion to members of a group identified as a race. Certain of its more significant features will be indicated.

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3 Paris suggests that race prejudice is “a particular class of social attitude, a particular subclass of a group attitude, involving a feeling of negative affective tone varying through a wide series.” Or again he states, “Race prejudice is recognized as a feeling of antipathy, or a tendency to withdraw, or to limit one’s contacts towards the members of a certain racial group.” *The Nature of Human Nature*, New York: McGraw Hill Publishing Co., 1937, pp. 291; 515.

Race prejudice is social and historical in origin, not instinctive and biological. It is a social attitude, of a kind with prejudices of class, caste, or nationality, whose origin and development in a given social order may be described in terms of such objective facts as the racial composition of the population, economic conditions, and social circumstances. Once established in a social order race prejudice becomes an integral part of the social heritage, and is transmitted from person to person or generation to generation as any other basic social reaction. The individual acquires it through contacts or hearsay, through informal or formal indoctrination; while its development in the individual life reflects the same "laws" or "principles" of learning as any other item of personal life-organization. Both in personal and collective life its origin or disappearance, its development or modification, reflects variable factors, which are neither strange nor mysterious, but may be observed and analyzed.

Once defined, race prejudice becomes a defensive in-group reaction, the expressed, and to some extent the source, of group consciousness and solidarity. So conceived, as Park has aptly put it, race prejudice is "an elementary expression of conservatism." That is, race prejudice represents a defense of the group's vested interests—jobs, security, "blood," "civilization" or status. Under these circumstances individuals in the out-group are identified and classified and derogatorily defined as "chink," "jap," "greaser," "sheeny," or "nigger." The individual outsider is a stranger, clothed in the imputed characteristics of a stereotyped category; and, as Shaler long ago suggested, the victim of prejudice remains a stranger and rarely achieves the status of neighbor. Contacts between members of the races involved are restricted, especially those involving prestige or status. Normally, equalizing contacts are tabooed. Economic, political, and social arrangements in time reflect this taboo. Social distances are institutionalized, while myths, doctrines and rationalizations emerge in defense and support of the status quo in race relations. Any threat to the system arouses the defensive reactions, transforming race prejudice into positive racial animosity or hatred.

In this discussion the instrumental

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12 This feature of race prejudice has of course been observed by many students, including Park, Paris, Reuter, Bogardus, Lind and Sutherland and Woodward. The latter writers have said that race prejudice is "the expression of a general defense reaction of one group in its efforts to keep intact from the economic competition and cultural influences of another," Introductory Sociology, New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1927, p. 604. More briefly, Lind says, "Race prejudice emerges as a defense mechanism whenever vested interests are seriously threatened." An Island Community, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938, p. 268.
character of race prejudice has been emphasized. It has been assumed primarily as a phenomenon of history, of social processes, of economic and political facts; and only incidentally as a reflection of the vagaries of the human psyche and "human nature." Too much attention has been given to race prejudice as an irrational impulse, an ambiguous response reflecting misunderstanding and misconceptions; and too little analysis has been made of its functional and institutional character. Obviously race prejudice is not invariably instrumental. Often it has no connection with immediate interest. Occasionally it may be described as an utterly irrational reaction, not relevantly connected with vital needs and interests. But in the main, it is dynamically related to the actual and assumed interests of individuals and groups. Analyzed in terms of its relation to jobs, economic interests, prestige, power, and status it ceases to be a vagarious impulse, and assumes the character of a basic social fact. With this emphasis in mind we proceed to our discussion of the specific relation of race prejudice to the status of the Negro.

The Specific Relation of Race Prejudice to the Status of the Negro

Prejudice toward the Negro emerged in the course of his enslavement. Fundamentally, however, race prejudice was less the "cause" of the Negro's subordination than the by-product and result. Undoubtedly, the physical and cultural distinctiveness of the Negro made his ultimate subjugation more palatable morally, and contributed to the subtler aspects of race prejudice." But obviously the labor needs of the settlers, the available labor supply represented by the Negro, and the tacit acceptance of slavery by men of the times were more fundamental to this development. The status of the Negroes in the beginning was essentially that of indentured servants. In time, however, the system of labor indenture for whites fell into disuse, the Negro's status gradually became that of a slave, first in fact, and by the middle of the eighteenth century generally in law. The development of the plantation economy in the Southern colonies shackled the Negro to the institution of slavery, though at all times there were free Negroes, restricted economically and socially by their identification, but nominally independent. With the rise of a class dependent upon slavery for material needs, status, and power, the subordination of the Negro was complete. Defensive prejudices and beliefs emerged in support of the vested interests of the ruling class and the status quo. Prejudice was directed against the Negro who violated caste, and racial doctrine substantiated the thesis of his inferiority and natural fitness as a slave and menial. All classes among whites shared these reactions and opinions, though not from the...
same motivations, or with equal reason. The prejudices and opinions of the slave-owning class were obviously directly related to their economic interests. The small middle class in the South, composed of tradesmen, professional people, and small farmers, had less immediate stakes in the slave system. However, they were identified with the system, in the main accepted it, and were anxious themselves to possess slaves. Generally, they shared the traditional prejudices and beliefs concerning the Negroes. Their class resentments possibly intensified their animosities toward the Negro. The race prejudices of the white working classes was definitely related to their economic interests and social status. The rural poor, including the poor whites, were to some extent the victims of the "agrarian imperialism" of the planter class. Their interests were menaced by slavery, and being unable to attack the dominant class, they hated their slave hirelings. The race prejudice of the poor represents a kind of ambiguous social response in which the Negro was held responsible for their lot. Their prejudice was to some extent an oblique expression of their economic and social degradation.

The Negro was a convenient scapegoat. Through despising him they vicariously elevated themselves, and incidentally, tightened the controls of the ruling class. The reaction of the poorer classes among the whites toward the Negro was in a sense more complex than the reaction of the upper classes. The prejudices of the latter were in support of their status, and the Negro was for them a necessary utility, tolerated only under conditions of subservience; while the race prejudice of the poor was in defense of a somewhat precarious status, though actually it was not the slave, per se, but the social system which was responsible for their insecurity. In the case of the skilled and semi-skilled workers, however, race prejudice was more directly related to specifically menaced material interests. This group of workers did suffer from the competition of slave labor, farmed out to employers by slave owners. The result was the historic antagonism to the Negro, which Spero and Harris have aptly described as the "aftermath of slavery."

The Rôle of Race Prejudice After Freedom

Under slavery race prejudice was controlled, at least in theory, through the codes, rituals and sanctions indigenous to the slave régime. Its overt expression was undoubtedly reduced to a minimum, though as we have seen, the prejudices of the whites of the lower class were more manifest. If among the upper classes race prejudice was less evident, it was primarily because for them the Negro was less a menace than a need. However, occasionally, and increasingly so after

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16 See Guion G. Johnson, Ante-Bellum North Carolina, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937, Chap. 3 for a good description of the classes in relation to slavery. The reader is referred also to Dodd, The Old South; Phillips, Life and Labor in the Old South; and Cotterill, The Old South.

17 This was true especially for the class known as "poor whites." For discussions of the character and rôle of this class under slavery see, A. N. J. Den Hollander in W. T. couch (Editor), Culture in the South, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938, chap. 20; and Guion G. Johnson, Ante-Bellum North Carolina, chap. 3.

18 Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, The Black Worker, New York: Columbia University Press, 1931, pp. 3-35; Spero and Harris analyze this situation in some detail. For specific cases of competition and conflict, some of which are used by Spero and Harris, see Documentary History of American Industrial Society, Vol. II. Plantation and Frontier, (Edited by U. B. Phillips), Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1909, pp. 360-368.
about 1830, even the master class lost some of its sang-froid in race relations. The periodic slave revolts, the growth of a free Negro population, always a symbolic menace to the “peculiar institution,” the intensification of abolitionism, the growth of the free society to the North, and the brewing of the irrepressible conflict, placed the slave interests on the defensive and strengthened caste prejudices and sentiments. However, in the main, up to the Civil War and the subsequent collapse of slavery and the social system supporting it, race prejudice among the upper classes was covert and defensive.

Under freedom, however, the situation changed. Traditional racial accommodations collapsed. The social system was disorganized; both races and all classes were disoriented. Under such conditions prejudices naturally hardened into animosities and hatreds. For a time it looked as if the Negro might achieve a status commensurate with the implications of freedom, but his slave background, the essential weakness of his allies and the monopoly of the economic power and social resources by the whites, doomed him to subordination under a régime in which freedom was less real than nominal.19 By 1900, in the South at least, the Negro’s political power was approximately zero; economically, he was an exploited rural and urban proletariat; and socially he was overtly adapted to the restrictive ritual of a low caste position. His “place” had been defined in terms of obesiance to all whites, while a vast body of sentiment, doctrines and mythology justified his subordination.20 Racial prejudices had apparently won again. Actually, however, the rôle of race prejudice was secondary. The whites were of course prejudiced against the Negro as an economic and political equal. However, their victory was not the result of their prejudice but of their power. Race prejudice merely served to solidify them as an in-group in a struggle involving security and status, pride, and prestige.

Race Prejudice and the Present Status of the Negro

While race prejudice as such has been of secondary importance in defining the status of the Negro, it must be considered in any realistic account of his rôle and position in American society. The present status of the Negro is affected in at least three ways by the operation of the factor of prejudice. It tends to bulwark the status quo in race relations; it is a factor in the limitation and restriction of the Negro’s advance along any front; and it is a contributing element in positive drives and movements to lessen the Negroes’ opportunities, reduce his advantages, and weaken his position.

Race prejudice bolsters the status quo in race relations. In the South, for example, little deviation from the traditional is allowed. Thus the Negro is expected without protest to play a subordinate rôle economically. He is

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20 For a brief note on the “natural history” of this process see E. B. Reuter, The American Race Problem, pp. 9-10. For two interesting accounts of the social subjection of the Negro as it existed around the turn of the century see Ray S. Baker, Following the Color Line, New York: Doudleay, Page and Co., 1908, and Maurice S. Evans, Black and White in the Southern States, New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915.
only approved when he submits to exploitation by the upper-class whites, and does not menace the vested interests of white workers. He is expected to function as a non-competitive and subservient caste. Any transgression of the ritual, codes or controls associated with his subordination evokes the reaction of prejudice; and may even bring in its wake violence, brutality, or possibly lynching. Prejudice therefore is profitable to the whites, or appears to be. Actually, so far as the white masses are concerned, it may be a solace to pride but hardly serves their material interests. Whether rational or not, however, race prejudice is a mechanism functioning in the defense of traditional arrangements. It represents resistance to change; and involves the assumed or actual protection of interests identified with race.

Race prejudice is a factor in the restriction of the Negro’s advance. As Park has said, every effort of the Negro “to move, to rise, and to improve his status, rather than his condition, has invariably met with opposition, aroused prejudice and stimulated racial animosities.” This type of reaction, under the conditions described, is almost automatic in the South. Thus any effort on the part of the Negro to improve his economic status is met with hostility. Park’s assumption, which was in a sense the philosophy of Booker Washington, that whites don’t resent the Negro’s improvement of his condition is only partially correct. The Negro is cautious not to flaunt new houses, good cars, increased acres, or a bank account. Even humble acceptance of inferiority does not always save him from the envy and possible wrath of his white neighbors. Any gesture or act, interpreted as a bid for power or social standing arouses whites to action. This limits the Negro’s advance and often mocks his ambitions to get on.

In the South the Negro’s bid for status is apt to be violently restricted; but even in the North it is opposed. The resistance in the South reflects tradition, the values of a social system, and the vested interests of a race. In the North the prejudice against the Negro is less consistently defined in the economic and social arrangements; and not so universally supported in public opinion. Nevertheless, the Negro is opposed as an economic, political, or social equal; and any threat to the interests of elements in the white population arouses the defensive reactions commonly associated with race prejudice. The riots and race conflicts incident to the increased migration of Negroes to Northern urban areas since 1916 reflect this fact. The whites of the South try to keep the Negro in “his place”; the whites of the North try to limit his competition and balk his rise.

Finally, race prejudice is not only defensive but aggressive as well. It is a factor in white aggression against the Negro. It serves to justify white

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23 See The Negro in Chicago (1922), Chaps. 1 and 2. For a general discussion of Negro migration to the Northern urban areas see Louise V. Kennedy, The Negro Peasant Turns Cityward, New York: Columbia University Press, 1930.
24 The Negro has been regarded with hostility in the labor unions, though admittedly the strike-breaking rôle of the Negro has been a factor in this hostility.
employers who reduce the Negro's wages, relief administrators who cut relief grants to Negro families below that for whites, white landlords who violate the elementary rights of the Negro tenant, or the official who is indifferent to the health, schooling or social welfare of the Negro. Given race prejudice, the status of the Negro is never too low to be reduced, nor his rights so few that he may not lose what he has. Reactionary practices, policies and movements win easy justification under conditions of prejudice.

Conclusions

Many aspects of race prejudice in relation to the status of the Negro have been ignored or given only brief treatment in this paper. For example, little has been said about the agencies and mechanisms through which racial prejudices and doctrines are inculcated and diffused. Too little attention has been given to the variations in the character and intensity of race prejudice among individuals and by occupation, class, and region. Unfortunately, too, there has been no discussion of the impact of prejudice on the motivations and personality of the Negro. Obviously, the character of the Negro's response to race prejudice is a factor in his status. Finally, in this discussion there has been a tendency to ignore the subtler manifestations of race prejudice. Emphasis has been given primarily to race prejudice as the expression of the actual or assumed conflicts of interests, associated with status, security, prestige, and power. Race prejudice has been analyzed in terms of social processes and institutions, rather than as a complex of psychological imponderables inevitably inhering in human nature, and spontaneously overt when members of different races meet. The functional and instrumental character of race prejudice, both in its defensive and aggressive aspects, has been emphasized. This is not to deny the subtle and apparently irrational reactions along the American racial front. Prejudice is not always motivated by impulses associated with material interests or by status and ego factors. Occasionally, it proves to be a habitual reaction without any rationale. It is obvious also that the average person prejudiced against the Negro is naive as to his motivation, and would vehemently deny that his response is related to his fears, needs, or vested interests. Moreover, it is clear that race prejudice does not always pay its agents, either economically or socially, unless the psychic income, derived from hatred and a sense of superiority, be reckoned. For many, prejudice against the Negro is a function of their identification with the white group, and not a rationally induced response. Such persons are conditioned, however, to regard with aversion or view with alarm any contact with the Negro that appears either to menace their group or them as individuals. Or they may hate the Negro for no apparent reason at all. Generally, however, even the subtleties of race prejudice and its apparently irrational aspects tend to reflect the gross facts of history, economics, and politics outlined in this paper. Possibly few of the manifestations of race prejudice against the Negro are outside the frame of reference described.
THE OUTLOOK

If the analysis given of the character of race prejudice is valid, it is not going to be appreciably weakened by preachments or by mere assaults upon the stupid misconceptions current among whites about Negroes. Such approaches and programs attack the symptoms and manifestations of race prejudice, rather than its associated factors. Any realistic program will take into account the economic foundations of race prejudice. It will recognize its relation to bread, security, and prestige. Any movement resulting in the economic, political or social collaboration of Negroes and whites is far more important in the mitigation of prejudice than all the grand gestures across race lines. When Negroes and whites work together for the solution of their common problems, economic, political and social, race is pushed into the background, and race prejudice tends to atrophy for want of rootage and sustenance. While in theory this is the case, the practical problem is effectuating the kind of collaboration suggested. Admittedly, so far, except in the more progressive wing of the labor movement, this desired end has not been achieved.