Race Consciousness Among American Negroes*

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THE CONCEPT OF RACE CONSCIOUSNESS

Race consciousness has been defined as a collective sentiment in which race becomes the object of loyalty and idealization. Through race consciousness the members of a race become a historic group, acquiring a past, aware of a present, and aspiring to a future. Race consciousness is essentially a characteristic of minority groups, more specifically, of oppressed minority groups, and takes the form of a feeling of solidarity among group members. It has been studied as manifested in immigrant groups in the United States, but not as manifested by Negroes, where the sentiment is unusually intense due to the larger numbers of Negroes and the greater discrimination they suffer.

In spite of the similarities between the development of race consciousness in immigrant groups and in the Negro, there are several very important differences. First, the immigrant has a background of Old World culture, his loyalty to which is an indication of his race consciousness. In addition, he comes to the United States with a group of his own people and settles near people from the same region, even the same town, not infrequently the same street, from which he has come. In such a situation race is an entity with a host of loyalty-inspiring connotations. This is not the case with the Negroes. Members of various tribes from all parts of West and Central Africa were thoroughly interpersed, first, in the great slave markets at the African ports, and again, when they were sold in this country. This process went on for more than two hundred years. Another contrast with the immigrant group is the ruthless way in which cultural assimilation was forced on these slaves. Every vestige of their cultural heritage was stripped from them.

Another factor which differentiates the Negro sharply from any immigrant group is the difficulty of physical assimilation. Even after nearly three hundred years of intermixture, the Negro is a distinct physical type; it is doubtful if group traits would disappear after another three hundred years of interbreeding. This is in sharp contrast to European immigrants, among whom the second, or at most the third, generation is indistinguishable from the rest of the population. Thus we have the anachronism that a group fully acculturated is yet denied complete participation in American society because of color, while an immigrant group which may not have acquired American standards to a comparable degree is accorded full privileges.

Comparing the Negro and the immigrant, we see two forces working in exactly opposite directions. In the case of the immigrant, a foreign culture is being slowly assimilated into the American pattern. With the Negro, the tendency is in the opposite direction; a people essentially Ameri-

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can are developing patterns different from and separate from the general American culture. The effect of race consciousness on the Negro has been to cause him to build up a common cultural heritage for the members of his group, similar to the heritage immigrants find ready-made in their home countries. One of the most obvious evidences of this feeling is the insistence on the use of the capital "N" in "Negro." Many Negro periodicals have gone so far as to capitalize the word "Colored" when referring to Negroes, showing a very intense desire to be recognized as a separate group in American life. The Negro is increasingly able to lead his own life apart from the whites. He has built up stores and banks, schools, and colleges, hotels and theaters, catering to his own people, because of the restrictions and embarrassments he suffered when attempting to patronize white institutions. This separate group life, established because of discriminations, is supported by race consciousness and its attendant race loyalty.

After pointing out the degree to which American Negro culture is essentially American, we intend to examine the nature and extent of discrimination and show that it is the main factor leading to the development of race consciousness. Then we intend to examine those institutions which the Negro has developed in his struggle for status and which are the best evidences of his race consciousness. Finally we desire to present briefly the philosophies of the important Negro leaders and to point out the shifting emphases in Negro thought regarding the race problem.

**DISCRIMINATION AND ITS EFFECT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF RACE CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG AMERICAN NEGROES**

*The Assimilation by Negroes of American Culture.*—The only factor common to all Negroes is color; they have no such identifying feature as language or Old World customs. American Negroes display attitudes, habits, and ideals that are American, not Negro. The great progress that the race has made since Emancipation is undoubtedly due to this imitation of and close association with the whites. Unlike the immigrant, the Negro has no old standards which he must discard, but imperfectly conceived American standards which must be enlarged and realized. The great mass of Negroes is, of course, far from realizing these, but the professional group contains many who have not only realized but gone beyond them and are superior as judged by any standards. It is interesting to note how this acceptance of the white man's standards is reflected in Negro attitudes. Books, newspapers, the radio, and especially the movies, reach colored as well as white people and are as potent an influence on the one as on the other. It must also be noted that Negro children no less than white children are affected by the stereotyped characterizations of Negroes presented to them especially on the stage and over the radio. Until wider publicity is given depicting the educated and well-bred Negro group, Negroes will find it difficult to develop race pride in their own children.

In addition to these recreational influences, formal education is a very
important factor in inculcating American mores into Negro children. It consistently glorifies white civilization, minimizing Negro achievements, and holding up American standards of living which are obviously out of reach for most Negroes and many white children. Because of these factors, the culture of the Negro groups is American, modified, naturally, by its inferior status and low economic level. This complete acceptance of white man's standards leads to some peculiar inconsistencies in Negro thought. Chief of these is the existence of a color line among Negroes.

The Color Line Among Negroes.—With the emphasis the American mores put on color, it is inevitable that Negroes themselves should acquire color attitudes and draw color lines. The feeling against color in the United States is almost quantitative, that is, it is most intense against the darkest Negroes, and progressively less against lighter and lighter ones. Due to this, mulattoes have always been in a favored position, have been able to obtain more thorough education, and to secure the type of employment that places them in the position of group leaders. Theorists argue that it is the mixture of white blood which makes mulattoes superior intellectually, but upon analysis it is seen that it is not greater innate ability, but greater economic opportunity due to lessened prejudice, that accounts for the greater success of mulattoes.

Negro society is ruled by the color lines which Negroes have set up; the lightest mulattoes are the aristocrats. "High yellow" girls are in a very favorable position, being in great demand as the wives of darker men. Hence Negro girls who are able to "pass" frequently do not, since they are in a privileged position. The characteristic sex-disproportion, showing a consistently smaller number of males than females, inexplicable biologically, is understandable when this preferential position of the light Negro girl is noted.

The Nature and Extent of Discrimination.—Discrimination against the Negro in the economic field has been heightened during the recent depression, especially in the South. Since Negroes have not been permitted to affiliate with organized labor, they have been excluded from many fields, in fact from practically all fields but domestic service and unskilled labor. They receive consistently lower pay than do whites doing the same work, are the last to be hired and first to be fired. Politically, also, the Negro in the South has no privileges. The disenfranchising measures of the Southern States have taken from him his only means of remedying inequalities and injustices in education, recreation, and other facilities controlled by state and municipality. But it is in the realm of things social that the weight of discrimination falls most heavily on the Negro, in the form of segregation of the races and its implication of the inferiority of all Negroes to all whites. Segregation is sanctioned as a means of avoiding race contact, since Negroes are presumably provided with separate but equal accommodations. Actually segregation applies only to the Negro—the white man can go anywhere with impunity.

In the more intangible aspects of social relations, the Negro meets with
the most irritating repercussions of race prejudice, such subtle forms of insult as the refusal of the terms "Mr." and "Mrs." to Negroes, and the use of the terms "nigger," "negro," and "negress." Negroes resent the flippancy with which some white men write about the race, and a Negro is never safe from being referred to in a slighting and contemptuous manner in newspapers.

Reactions to Discrimination.—Discrimination in its manifestations in every phase of life is undoubtedly the most potent factor in the development of group solidarity. It is the only unifying force which the race has, and thus, while it is tragic for the individual, it has become an asset to the race, compelling unity and accelerating progress. It is the one factor which cuts across all social distinctions within the Negro group and which stimulates a race consciousness from the group as a whole.

Upon examination there seem to be four well-defined patterns of reaction to discrimination. The first is an attitude of bitterness and hatred and it comes from a class of ex-convicts, transient laborers, and loafers, who usually have good reason to hate all white people. The few atrocious crimes which have given a reputation for criminality to the entire Negro group come from this class of desperate men who are out to revenge themselves on the white world which has treated them unfairly. The second class is characterized by an outward acceptance of discrimination and a fierce inner resentment never voiced to white people. The member of this group, by far the largest, are those who are in intimate contact with whites, usually in domestic service or other occupation where their jobs depend on their keeping quiet. The third group is made up of those who are not dependent on white people and hence are able to voice their own resentment and that of the entire group. This is the group that is actively supporting the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, with its militant program. While relatively few, the members of this group are conspicuous out of all proportion to their numbers due to their vociferousness wherever Negro rights are concerned. In addition they possess in the N.A.A.C.P. an organization which seeks publicity. It is in this group that the race consciousness felt by most Negroes is expressed and consciously developed. The fourth group reaction toward discrimination is that of avoidance. It has caused the development of self-sufficient Negro communities, and reaches its extreme when very light Negroes "pass" for white. In general, it may be stated that the discrimination under which all Negroes suffer, the force of white opinion against them, has welded them into a more or less coherent group and developed in them a powerful race consciousness.

Development of Race Pride.—One of the effects of race consciousness on a group is the development of race pride, and a long and glorious race history is the foundation for this pride. The greater part of the Negro's life in this country was far from glorious, so that Negroes have turned back to Africa and sought there the historic past they lack. Opportunity and The Crisis have, in past years, contained a number of articles on various as-
pects of African life, especially African art. Pride is felt by those Negroes who can trace their ancestry back to Africa; both W. E. B. Du Bois and R. R. Moton do this in their books. The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History has done much valuable work on Negro life in slavery days, and has contributed much to the racial heritage the Negro group lacks as compared with other groups. The same may be said of the American Negro Academy and the Negro Society for Historical Research.

One of the efforts of race leaders has been to rewrite those chapters of history which ignore or minimize the part Negroes have played in the development of the United States. Articles and books have been written, setting forth the importance of Negro labor to the South and telling the stories of various Negro patriots. One of the best examples of these endeavors to rewrite history is Dr. Du Bois' recent book, *Black Reconstruction*. Du Bois reinterprets the events of the Civil War and Reconstruction period from the point of view of refuting many aspersions cast against the Negroes of that period.

The Negro group is very much concerned with the individual. When a Negro makes a success it is credited not only to him, but to the race. The group keeps close track of Negroes who have been successful in all fields, especially those who have excelled in competition with whites. Because race pride is in itself a defense mechanism against prevailing opinions of inferiority, it is often misplaced, and mediocre accomplishments are praised in the highest terms. A good deal of Negro literature comes in this category, as well as some musical and artistic attempts. Negroes have undoubtedly produced stars of first magnitude in many fields, but few Negroes discriminate between them and a host of indifferent imitators. The work is judged, not on its own merits, but as adding to the prestige of the race.

*World Consciousness.*—Tied up with the growing race consciousness of the American Negro is a growing world consciousness among all the colored peoples. It is a sentiment as yet not seriously entertained by the great mass of American Negroes, but interest in the recent Ethiopian-Italian conflict demonstrated the presence of such a sentiment in America. Dr. Du Bois has long been interested in world relationships among the non-white races, and has been the exponent of world consciousness in this country. The *Negro Year Book* for 1931–32 included material on the Negro in Latin America, Europe, and Africa, and Detweiler's survey of the Negro press found newspapers running frequent articles on race relations in South America, Asia, and Africa. The Garvey "Back to Africa" movement was the first attempt to unite all the black people of the world in a movement for their social and political uplift. It will be seen from these evidences that American Negroes do feel to some extent the world consciousness that Dr. Du Bois has worked so hard to develop in them. Any such sentiment works directly to further the race consciousness of the American Negro group.

**THE AGENCIES FOSTERING RACE CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG AMERICAN NEGROES**

*The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.*—The leading organization which crystal-
lizes the race consciousness of the American Negro group is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in New York in 1910 by a committee from both races. This organization succeeded a radical agitation known as the Niagara Movement, which rose as an opposition to the political and social views of Booker T. Washington. For many years Dr. W. E. Du Bois was Director of Publicity and Research, and editor of The Crisis, considered the most effective and best written propagandist periodical in the United States. A man of almost fanatical belief in his cause and an indefatigable worker, much of the success of the organization, and the entire success of The Crisis, was due to his efforts. With the establishment of branches in cities all over the country, and with increased financial security, the Association has expanded its staff and has built up an enviable personnel, at present headed by Walter White as Secretary. The two most important undertakings of the Association have been its work of legal redress and its anti-lynching campaign. In spite of the great value of the work of the Association in securing Negro rights, the organization receives pitifully scant support from the group whose rights it defends.

The approach of the Association, while the most effective in securing Negro rights, is probably the least effective in securing the general support and friendship of white people. However, from the point of view of this study, the Association is the most important single evidence of race consciousness among American Negroes.

The National Urban League.—Another organization designed to improve the condition of the American Negro, but less militant in method and purpose, is the National Urban League, which devotes its attention to problems of economic conditions, housing, and health. It publishes Opportunity, a magazine somewhat resembling The Crisis, but less propagandistic, with more emphasis on literary efforts. Through its Award contests, it encourages young Negro writers. The League dates from 1911, when it was formed by the fusion of two smaller societies. In addition to its work in securing employment for Negroes, it was instrumental in establishing the Division of Negro Economics in the U.S. Department of Labor, and in training many young Negro social workers. It has published some valuable studies on urban conditions among Negroes. It is a more practical and less extreme indication of race consciousness than the N.A.A.C.P.

The Negro Press.—Leaving the white newspapers to supply Negroes with news of world events, the Negro press concentrates on news of Negroes, or news which directly affects Negroes. Negro newspapers are almost all weeklies, and are published in large cities where there is a large Negro group, Baltimore, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. In a study made of the Negro press in 1922, it was found that more than three-fifths of the news directly concerned with the problem of race, with social notes the next largest heading. The militant nature of the Negro Press is shown in the names of the newspapers: Advocate, Challenge, Whip, Crusader. In 1921 out of a total of 492 periodicals, 253 were newspapers; the remaining 239 were divided into four groups,
religious periodicals, fraternal and labor journals, school and college publications, and magazines. The press is extremely race conscious and works to foster race consciousness in the Negro group.

The Negro Church.—The church was the only institution developed by the Negro in slavery and it is his very own to an extent not equaled by other institutions, since it is supported entirely from within the group. It is handicapped by inadequately trained and poorly paid pastors, a heavy load of indebtedness on church buildings, and a great number of small denominations which weaken the church through their competition. Potentially the Negro Church is the social center of Negro life, one of the most powerful tools the Negro has in his struggle for status. Like the Negro press, the church is both an evidence of race consciousness, and at the same time a means of fostering it through its teachings.

Negro Literature.—The earliest Negro writings were slave narratives which were very popular in the first half of the nineteenth century. Among novelists, Dunbar, Chestnutt, Walter White, and, more recently, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Jessie Fauset, have reflected various aspects of life within their group. Countee Cullen, McKay, and Hughes have written some outstanding poetry, usually on some theme connected with race. Perhaps the most influential single voice among Negroes is James Weldon Johnson’s, because of his broader sympathies and the absence of petty rancor and bitterness from his work. In the field of essays, Du Bois and Alain Locke are the chief representatives, and in the field of sociology, Charles S. Johnson’s objectivity of treatment and careful array of facts is notable. More and more noticeable in Negro literature is the trend toward objectivity, away from frenzied denunciation of white people and hot defense of the Negro. Since Negro literature centers about the Negro and derives its material from the Negro group, it is a valuable evidence of race consciousness.

Negro Fraternal Organizations.—In noting evidences of race consciousness among American Negroes, any organization which they develop within the group is important, but Negro fraternal societies are important for additional reasons. The high-sounding titles of dignitaries, the complexity of organization, and the impressive rites and ritual, are means of enhancing the Negro’s self-respect against daily life as a member of a minority group; lodge politics serve to appease the desires of a disfranchised group; and national organizations tend to unify a scattered people. There are Negro branches of such white orders as Masons, Odd Fellows, and Knights of Pythias, and there are also several national societies that are distinctly Negro, such as the Grand United Order of Galilean Fishermen. In addition to these fraternal organizations, there are such professional groups as the National Negro Medical Association, the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools, and the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs.

Lack of Unity.—In spite of the increasing solidarity of the American Negro group as evidenced by the foregoing discussion, it is far from attain-
ing any great measure of unity. Undoubtedly the Negro’s greatest hope in his fight for the privileges of full citizenship is his vote, yet Negroes in the large Northern cities are not organized politically. The Negro Church loses much of its effectiveness through multiplication of sects and interdenominational rivalry. The Negro press lacks the whole-hearted backing of the race. There is a growing gap between upper and lower classes, and there are breaches between the various group leaders who advocate different solutions for the race problem. The Negro group is far from united, and this lack of unity works directly against the development of race consciousness which, it will be remembered from the definition, involves group solidarity and unity.

**Race Leaders and Programs of Race Adjustment**

The first leader of his race in the confused days following Reconstruction was Booker T. Washington, whose philosophy still guides the great majority of Southern Negroes. Because of his emphasis on industrial training for Negroes, Washington was popular with Southern whites and received much support from them. He has been criticized by short-sighted members of his own race, who do not realize that at that critical period in the South, Washington hit the only note that would be acceptable to Southern whites. From the point of view of his people, his plan offered more than any other at that time. The great mass of Negroes needed industrial training; the race had no resources, and Washington was wise enough to realize that a solid economic foundation was essential if Negroes hoped to make any progress at all. Washington’s successor at Tuskegee was Robert Russa Moton, who has, to some extent, taken Washington’s place as leader of the Southern Negroes. His book, *What the Negro Thinks*, is one of the most valuable books written on the Negro. Moton has followed Washington’s plan of industrial training for Negroes, although modifying it slightly in view of the increasing acceptance of higher education as a necessity for everyone. He appreciates and seeks the support of Southern whites, and wherever possible strikes a note of optimism; he stresses the progress the race has already made, and the indications of better feeling between the races. At the same time Moton steadfastly refuses to endorse enforced segregation, with its implication of inferiority.

The militant Northern group of Negroes have repeatedly attacked Moton on the grounds of what they call his servility to white people, without realizing that Moton’s viewpoint is the only one possible in the South now, or at any time in the near future. In contrast to the rebellious, idealistic Northern school of thought, scornful of compromise and hot in defense, the philosophy of the Southern school is opportunistic and utilitarian, optimistic, tactful, and ready to compromise. Perhaps the best judgment of the two groups is to say that both are needed if the Negro is to make any progress. The N.A.A.C.P., through its legal battles, has won and will win new rights for Negroes. On the other hand, the friendly cooperation fostered by the conservative school tends to hold these gains and to smooth
over the antagonisms caused by the militant approach.

For many years the outspoken leader of the militant group was W. E. B. Du Bois. From 1910 until 1934 as editor of The Crisis, Du Bois threw all his energy into the fight for political and civil rights. His battle cry was "No Segregation," and for years he thundered protests against segregation with all its implied and attendant evils. It seemed a complete reversal of opinion when, in 1934, he advocated the development of a self-contained economy within the Negro group through voluntary segregation. A controversy with the Board of Directors of the N.A.A.C.P. led to his resignation. It is interesting to note that at the very time when Dr. Du Bois was rejecting the N.A.A.C.P. and advocating a self-contained Negro group, James Weldon Johnson was doing exactly the opposite. Johnson's program, as detailed in Negro Americans, What Now?, seems to combine as nearly as possible the militant approach of the N.A.A.C.P. and the opportunist philosophy of the Southern conservatives. It would appear to be the most feasible of any of the so-called solutions of the race problems.

CONCLUSION

It can be seen from the preceding discussion that there is not, and has never been, any single philosophy about the race problem which has been held by the entire group. At most, there have been certain stages of thought characteristic of most members of the race. Immediately after Emancipation, the prevailing conception was that the solution of the race problem lay in the Negro's vote. Following the disfranchising measures, came Booker T. Washington with his program of industrial training, which was the dominant program almost until the time of the War. After the War, prevailing Negro thought swung to legal action as the means of solving the race problem and the leadership swung definitely to the Northern intellectuals. The only program in which the entire race has had faith ever since Emancipation is education.

Today there is no one program and no one objective for the Negro race. The plan holding the most promise for the Negro would seem to be an opportunist one; he must seize every chance he can, whether it is an injustice which can be corrected through the courts, or false reports that can be corrected by the dissemination of facts. Above all, he must make friends and establish friendly attitudes with white people. There are great possibilities in the work suggested for schools, both for white and colored pupils. The Negro child's education should be of the sort to help him in adjusting to his difficult position as a member of a minority group, and white children should not be given false impressions of Negroes which will cause the development of race prejudice.

The present emphasis is largely upon personal attitudes as reflected in race relations. A program which undertakes effectively to change attitudes of prejudice to those of cooperation would seem to hold the most promise for a successful solution of the race problem.