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## Evolution of the Race Problem

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#### “Evolution of the Race Problem”

By W.E.B. DuBois

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Those who complain that the Negro problem is always with us and apparently insoluble must not forget that under this vague and general designation are gathered many social problems and many phases of the same problem; that these problems and phases have passed through a great evolutionary circle and that to-day especially one may clearly see a repetition, vaster but similar, of the great cycle of the past.

That problem of the past, so far as the black American was concerned, began with caste—a definite place preordained in custom, law and religion where all men of black blood must be thrust. To be sure, this caste idea as applied to blacks was no sudden, full grown conception, for the enslavement of the workers was an idea which America inherited from Europe and was not synonymous for many years with the enslavement of the blacks, although the blacks were the chief workers. Men came to the idea of exclusive black slavery by gradually enslaving the workers, as was the world’s long custom, and then gradually conceiving certain sorts of work and certain colors of men as necessarily connected. It was, when once set up definitely in the southern slave system, a logically cohering whole which the simplest social philosopher could easily grasp and state. The difficulty was it was too simple to be either just or true. Human nature is not simple and any classification that roughly divides men into good and bad, superior and inferior, slave and free, is and must ever be ludicrously untrue and universally dangerous as a permanent exhaustive classification. So in the southern slave system the thing that from the first damned it was the free Negro—the Negro legally free, the Negro economically free and the Negro spiritually free.

How was the Negro to be treated and conceived of who was legally free? At first with perfect naturalness he was treated as a man—he voted in Massachusetts and in South Carolina, in New York and Virginia; he intermarried with black and white, he claimed and received his civil rights—all this until the caste of color was so turned as to correspond with the caste of work and enslave not only slaves but black men who were not slaves. Even this system, however, was unable to ensure complete economic dependence on the part of all black men; there were continually artisans, foremen and skilled servants who became economically too valuable to be slaves. In vain were laws hurled at Negro intelligence and responsibility; black men continued to hire their time and to steal some smattering of knowledge, and it was this fact that became the gravest menace to the slave system. But even legal and economic freedom was not so dangerous to slavery as the free spirit which continually cropped out among men fated to be slaves: they thought, they dreamed, they aspired, they resisted. In vain were they beaten, sold south and killed, the ranks were continually filled with others and they either led revolt at home or ran away to the North, and these by showing their human qualities continually gave the lie to the slave

assumption. Thus it was the free Negro in these manifold phases of his appearance who hastened the economic crisis which killed slavery and who made it impossible to make the caste of work and the caste of color correspond, and who became at once the promise and excuse of those who forced the critical revolution.

To-day in larger cycle and more intricate detail we are passing through certain phases of a similar evolution. To-day we have the caste idea—again not a sudden full grown conception but one being insidiously but consciously and persistently pressed upon the nation. The steps toward it which are being taken are: first, political disfranchisement, then vocational education with the distinct idea of narrowing to the uttermost of the vocations in view, and finally a curtailment of civil freedom of travel, association, and entertainment, in systematic effort to instill contempt and kill self-respect.

Here then is the new slavery of black men in America—a new attempt to make degradation of social condition correspond with certain physical characteristics—not to be sure fully realized as yet, and probably unable for reasons of social development ever to become as systematized as the economic and physical slavery of the past—and yet realized to an extent almost unbelievable by those who have not taken the pains to study the facts—to an extent which makes the lives of thinking black men in this land a perpetual martyrdom.

But right here, as in the past, stands in the path of this idea the figure of this same thinking black man—this new freedman. This freedman again, as in the past, presents himself as free in varying phases: there is the free black voter of the North and border states whose power is far more tremendous than even he dare think so that he is afraid to use it; there is the black man who has accomplished economic freedom and who by working himself into the vast industrial development of the nation is to-day accumulating property at a rate that is simply astounding. And finally there is the small but growing number of black men emerging into spiritual freedom and becoming participators and freemen of the kingdom of culture around which it is so singularly difficult to set metes and bounds, and who in art, science and literature are making their modest but ineffaceable mark.

The question is what is the significance of this group of men for the future of the caste programme and for the future social development of America? In order to answer this question intelligently let us retrace our steps and follow more carefully the details of the proposed programme of renewed caste in America. This programme when one comes to define and state it is elusive. There are even those who deny its existence as a definite consciously conceived plan of action. But, certain it is, there is growing unanimity of a peculiar sort on certain matters. And this unanimity is centering about three propositions:

1. That it was a mistake to give Negroes the ballot.
2. That Negroes are essentially an inferior race.
3. That the only permanent settlement of the race problem will be open and legal recognition of this inferiority.

When now a modern nation condemns ten million of its fellows to such a fate it would be supposed that this conclusion has been reluctantly forced upon them after a careful study and weighing of the facts. This, however, is not the case in the Negro problem. On the contrary there has been manifest a singular reluctance and indisposition carefully to study the Negro problem. Ask the average American: Why should the ballot have been withheld from the Negro, and he will answer: "Because he wasn't fit for it." But that is not a sufficient answer: first, because few newly enfranchised groups of the most successful democracies have been fit for the ballot when it was first given, and secondly, because there were Negroes in the United States fit for the ballot in 1870. Moreover the political philosophy that condemns out of hand the Fifteenth Amendment does not often stop to think that the problem before the American nation 1865-1870 was not a simple problem of fixing the qualifications of voters. It was, on the contrary, the immensely more complicated problem of enforcing a vast social and economic revolution on a people determined not to submit to it. Whenever a moral reform is forced on a people from without there ensue complicated and tremendous problems, whether that reform is the correction of the abuse of alcohol, the abolition of child labor or the emancipation of slaves. The enforcement of such a reform

will strain every nerve of the nation and the real question is not: Is it a good thing to strain the framework of the nation but rather: Is slavery so dangerous a thing that sudden enfranchisement of the ex-slaves is too great a price to pay for its abolition?

To be sure there are those who profess to think that the white South of its own initiative after the war, with the whole of the wealth, intelligence and law-making power in its hands, would have freely emancipated its slaves in obedience to a decree from Washington, just as there are those who would entrust the regulation of the whiskey traffic to saloon keepers and the bettering of the conditions of child labor to the employers. It is no attack on the South or on saloon keepers or on employers to say that such a reform from such a source is unthinkable. It is simply human nature that men trained to a social system or condition should be the last to be entirely entrusted with its reformation. It was, then, not the Emancipation Proclamation but the Fifteenth Amendment that made slavery impossible in the United States and those that object to the Fifteenth Amendment have simply this question to answer: Which was best, slavery or ignorant Negro voters? The answer is clear as day: Negro voters never did anything as bad as slavery. If they were guilty of all the crimes charged to them by the wildest enemies, even then what they did was less dangerous, less evil and less cruel than the system of slavery whose death knell they struck. And when in addition to this we remember that the black voters of the South established the public schools, gave the poor whites the ballot, modernized the penal code and put on the statute books of the South page after page of legislation that still stands to-day—when we remember this, we have a right to conclude that the Fifteenth Amendment was a wise and far-sighted piece of statesmanship.

But to-day the men who oppose the right of Negroes to vote are no longer doing so on the ground of ignorance, and with good reason, for to-day a majority and an appreciable majority of the black men of the South twenty-one years of age and over can read and write. In other words, the bottom has been clean knocked out of their ignorance argument and yet the fact has elicited scarcely a loud remark.

Indeed we black men are continually puzzled by the easy almost unconscious way in which our detractors change their ground. Before emancipation it was stated and reiterated with bitter emphasis and absolute confidence that a free Negro would prove to be a shiftless scamp, a barbarian and a cannibal reverting to savagery and doomed to death. We forget to-day that from 1830 to 1860 there was not a statement made by the masters of slaves more often reiterated than this, and more dogmatically and absolutely stated. After emancipation, for twenty years and more, so many people looked for the fulfillment of the prophecy that many actually saw it and we heard and kept hearing and now and then still hear that the Negro to-day is worse off than in slavery days. Then, as this statement grew less and less plausible, its place came to be taken by other assumptions. When a Louisiana senator saw the first Negro school he stopped and said: "This is the climax of foolishness!" The Negro could not be educated—he could imitate like a parrot but real mental development was impossible.

Then, when Negroes did learn some things, it was said that education spoiled them; they can learn but it does them no practical good; the young educated Negroes become criminals—they neither save nor work, they are shiftless and lazy. Now to-day are coming uncomfortable facts for this theory. The generation now working and saving is post-bellum and yet no sooner does it come on the stage than accumulated property goes on at an accelerated pace so far as we have measurements. In Georgia the increase of property among Negroes in the last ten years has been 83%. But no sooner do facts like these come to the fore than again the ground of opposition subtly shifts and this last shifting has been so gradual and so insidious that the Negro and his friends are still answering arguments that are no longer being pushed. The most subtle enemies of democracy and the most persistent advocates of the color line admit almost contemptuously most that their forebears strenuously denied: the Negroes have progressed since slavery, they are accumulating some property, some of them work readily and they are susceptible of elementary training; but, they say, all thought of treating black men like white men must be abandoned. They are an inferior stock of men, limited in attainment by nature. You cannot legislate against nature, and philanthropy is powerless against deficient cerebral development.

To realize the full weight of this argument recall to mind a character like John Brown and contrast his

attitude with the attitude of to-day. John Brown loved his neighbor as himself. He could not endure, therefore, to see his neighbor poor, unfortunate or oppressed. This natural sympathy was strengthened by a saturation in Hebrew religion which stressed the personal responsibility of every man's soul to a just God. To this religion of equality and sympathy with misfortune was added the strong influence of the social doctrines of the French Revolution with its emphasis on freedom and power in political life. And on all this was built John Brown's own inchoate but growing belief in a juster and more equal distribution of property. From all this John Brown concluded—and acted on that conclusion—that all men were created free and equal and that the cost of liberty was less than the price of repression. Up to the time of John Brown's death this doctrine was a growing, conquering social thing. Since then there has come a change and many would rightly find reason for that change in the coincidence that the year John Brown suffered martyrdom was the year that first published the *Origin of Species*. Since that tremendous scientific and economic advance has been accompanied by distinct signs of moral change in social philosophy; strong arguments have been made for the fostering of war, the social utility of human degradation and disease, and the inevitable and known inferiority of certain classes and races of men. While such arguments have not stopped the efforts of the advocates of peace, the workers of social uplift and the believers in human brotherhood, they have, it must be confessed, often made their voices falter and tinged their arguments with apology.

Why is this? It is because the splendid scientific work of Darwin, Weissman, Galton and others has been widely and popularly interpreted as meaning that there is such essential and inevitable inequality among men and the races of men as no philanthropy can or ought to eliminate; that civilization is a struggle for existence whereby the weaker nations and individuals will gradually succumb and the strong will inherit the earth. With this interpretation has gone the silent assumption that the white European stock represents the strong surviving peoples and that the swarthy, yellow and black peoples are the ones rightly doomed to eventual extinction.

One can easily see what influence such a doctrine would have on the race problem in America. It meant moral revolution in the attitude of the nation. Those that stepped into the pathway marked by the early abolitionists faltered and large numbers turned back. They said: They were good men—even great, but they have no message for us to-day—John Brown was a “belated covenanter,” William Lloyd Garrison was an anachronism in the age of Darwin—men who gave their lives to lift not the unlifted but the unliftable. We have, consequently, the present reaction -- a reaction which says in effect: Keep these black people in their places, and do not attempt to treat a Negro simply as a white man with a black face; to do this would mean moral deterioration of the race and nation—a fate against which a divine racial prejudice is successfully fighting. This is the attitude of the larger portion of the thinking nation to-day.

It is not, however, an attitude that has brought mental rest or social peace. On the contrary, it is to-day involving a degree of moral strain and political and social anomaly that gives the wisest pause. The chief difficulty has been that the natural place in which, by scientific law, the black race in America should stay cannot easily be determined. To be sure, the freedmen did not, as the philanthropists of the sixties apparently expected, step in forty years from slavery to nineteenth century civilization. Neither, on the other hand, did they, as the ex-masters confidently predicted, retrograde and die. Contrary to both these views, they chose a third and apparently quite unawaited way: from the great, sluggish, almost imperceptibly moving mass they sent off larger and larger numbers of faithful workmen and artisans, some merchants and professional men, and even men of educational ability and discernment. They developed in a generation no world geniuses, no millionaires, no captains of industry, no artists of first rank; but they did in forty years get rid of the larger part of their illiteracy, accumulate a half billion of property in small homesteads and gained now and then respectful attention in the world's ears and eyes. It has been argued that this progress of the black man in America is due to the exceptional men among them and does not measure the ability of the mass. Such admission is, however, fatal to the whole argument. If the doomed races of men are going to develop exceptions to the rule of inferiority then no law, scientific or moral, should or can proscribe the race as such.

To meet this difficulty in racial philosophy a step has been taken in America fraught with the gravest

social consequences to the world and threatening not simply the political but the moral integrity of the nation: that step is to deny in the case of black men the validity of those evidences of culture, ability and decency which are accepted unquestionably in the case of other people, and by vague assertion, unprovable assumption, unjust emphasis, and now and then by deliberate untruth, to secure not only the continued proscription of these people, but by caste distinction to shut in the faces of their rising classes many of the paths to further advance.

When a social policy based on a supposed scientific sanction leads to such a moral anomaly it is time to examine rather carefully the logical foundations of the argument. And so soon as we do this many things are clear. First, assuming that there are certain stocks of human beings whose elimination the best welfare of the world demands; it is certainly questionable if these stocks include the majority of mankind and it is indefensible and monstrous to pretend that we know to-day with any reasonable certainty which these stocks are. We can point to degenerate individuals and families here and there among all races, but there is not the slightest warrant for assuming that there do not exist among the Chinese and Hindus, the African Bantus and American Indians as lofty possibilities of human culture as any European race has ever exhibited. It is, to be sure, puzzling to know why the Soudan should linger a thousand years in culture behind the valley of the Seine, but it is no more puzzling than the fact that the valley of the Thames was miserably backward as compared with the banks of the Tiber. Climate, human contact, facilities of communication, and what we call accident have played great part in the rise of culture among nations: to ignore these and to assert dogmatically that the present distribution of culture is a fair index of the distribution of human ability and desert is to make an assertion for which there is not the slightest scientific warrant.

What the age of Darwin has done is to add to the eighteenth century idea of individual worth the complementary idea of physical immortality of the human race. And this, far from annulling or contracting the idea of human freedom, rather emphasizes its necessity and eternal possibility—the boundlessness and endlessness of possible human achievement. Freedom has come to mean not individual caprice or aberration but social self-realization in an endless chain of selves, and freedom for such development is not the denial but the central assertion of the revolutionary theory. So, too, the doctrine of human equality passes through the fire of scientific inquiry not obliterated but transfigured; not equality of present attainment but equality of opportunity for unbounded future attainment is the rightful demand of mankind.

What now does the present hegemony of the white races threaten? It threatens by the means of brute force a survival of some of the worst stocks of mankind. It attempts to people the best part of the earth and put in absolute authority over the rest not only, and indeed not mainly, the culture of Europe, but its greed and degradation—not only some representatives of the best stocks of the west end of London, upper New York and the Champs Elysées but also, and in as large, if not larger, numbers, the worst stocks of Whitechapel, the East Side and Montmartre; and it attempts to make the slums of white society in all cases and under all circumstances the superior of any colored group, no matter what its ability or culture; it attempts to put the intelligent, property holding, efficient Negroes of the South under the heels and at the absolute mercy of such constituencies as Tillman, Vardaman and Jeff Davis represent.

To be sure, this outrageous programme of wholesale human degeneration is not outspoken yet save in the backward civilizations of the southern United States, South Africa and Australia. But its enunciation is listened to with respect and tolerance in England, Germany and the northern states and nowhere with more equanimity than right here in New York by those very persons who accuse philanthropy with seeking to degenerate white blood by an infiltration of colored strains. And the average citizen is voting ships and guns to carry out this programme.

This movement gathered force and strength during the latter half of the nineteenth century and reached its culmination when France, Germany and England and Russia began the partition of China and the East. With the sudden self-assertion of Japan its wildest dreams collapsed, but it is still to-day a living, virile, potent force and motive, and the most subtle and dangerous enemy of world peace and the

dream of human brotherhood. It has a whole vocabulary of its own: the strong races, superior peoples, race preservation, the struggle for survival and a peculiar use of the word "white." And by this it means the right of white men of any kind to club blacks into submission, to make them surrender their wealth and the use of their women, and to submit to the dictation of white men without murmur, for the sake of being swept off the fairest portions of the earth or held there in perpetual serfdom or guardianship. Ignoring the fact that the era of physical struggle for survival has passed away among human beings and that there is plenty of room accessible on earth for all, this theory makes the possession of Krupp guns the main criterion of mental stamina and moral fitness.

Even armed with this morality of the club and every advantage of modern culture, the white races have been unable to possess the earth; many signs of degeneracy have appeared among them; their birthrate is falling, their average ability is not increasing, their physical stamina is impaired, their social condition is not reassuring, and their religion is a growing mass of transparent and self-confessed hypocrisy. Lacking the physical ability to take possession of the world, they are to-day fencing in America, Australia, and South Africa and declaring that no dark race shall occupy or develop the land which they themselves are unable to use. And all this on the plea that their stock is threatened with deterioration from without, when in fact its most dangerous fate is deterioration from within. We are in fact to-day repeating in our intercourse between races all the former evils of class injustice, unequal taxation and rigid caste. Individual nations outgrew these fatal things by breaking down the horizontal barriers between classes. We are bringing them back by seeking to erect vertical barriers between races. Men were told that abolition of compulsory class distinction meant leveling down, degradation, disappearance of culture and genius, and the triumph of the mob. As a matter of fact, it has been the salvation of European civilization. Some deterioration and leveling there was, but it was more than balanced by the discovery of new reservoirs of ability and strength. So to-day we are told that free racial contact -- or "social equality" as southern *patois* has it -- means contamination of blood and lowering of ability and culture. It need mean nothing of the sort. Abolition of class distinction does not mean universal intermarriage of stocks, but rather the survival of the fittest by peaceful personal and social selection, a selection all the more effective because free democracy and equality of opportunity allow the best to rise to their rightful place.

The same is true in racial contact. The abolition of the lines of vertical race distinction and their tearing away involves fewer chances of degradation and greater opportunities of human betterment than in the case of class lines. On the other hand, the persistence in racial distinctions spells disaster sooner or later. The earth is growing smaller and more accessible. Race contact will become in the future increasingly inevitable, not only in America, Asia and Africa, but even in Europe. The color line will mean not simply a return to the absurdities of class as exhibited in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but even to the caste of ancient days. This, however, the Japanese, the Chinese, the East Indian and the Negroes are going to resent in just such proportion as they gain the power; and they are gaining the power, and they cannot be kept from gaining more power. The price of repression will then be hypocrisy and slavery and blood.

This is the problem of to-day, and what is its mighty answer? It is this great word: The cost of liberty is less than the price of repression. The price of repressing the world's darker races is shown in a moral retrogression and economic waste unparalleled since the age of the African slave trade. What would be the cost of liberty? What would be the cost of giving the great stocks of mankind every reasonable help and incentive to self-development—opening the avenues of opportunity freely, spreading knowledge, suppressing war and cheating, and treating men and women as equals the world over whenever and wherever they attain equality? It would cost something. It would cost something in pride and prejudice, for eventually many a white man would be blacking black men's boots; but this cost we may ignore—its greatest cost would be the new problems of racial intercourse and intermarriage which would come to the front. Freedom and equal opportunity in this respect would inevitably bring some intermarriage of whites and yellows and browns and blacks. If such marriages are proven inadvisable how could they be stopped? Easily. We associate with cats and cows but we do not fear intermarriage with them even though they be given all freedom of development. So, too, intelligent human beings can be trained to breed intelligently without the degradation of such of their fellows as they may not wish to breed with.

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In the southern United States on the contrary it is assumed that unwise marriage can only be stopped by the degradation of the blacks, the classing of their women with prostitutes, the loading the whole race with every badge of public isolation, degradation and contempt and by burning offenders at the stake.

Is this civilization? No. The civilized method of preventing ill-advised marriage lies in the training of mankind in ethics of sex and childbearing. We cannot ensure the survival of the best blood by the public murder and degradation of unworthy suitors, but we can substitute a civilized human selection of husbands and wives which shall ensure the survival of the fittest. Not the methods of the jungle, not even the careless choices of the drawing room, but the thoughtful selection of the schools and laboratory is the ideal of future marriage. This will cost something in ingenuity, self-control, and toleration but it will cost less than forcible repression.

Not only is the cost of repression to-day large—it is a continually increasing cost, because of the fact that furnished the fatal moral anomaly against which physical slavery could not stand—the free Negro—the Negro who in spite of contempt, discouragement, caste and poverty has put himself on a plane where it is simply impossible to deny that he is by every legitimate measurement the equal of his average white neighbor. The former argument was as I have mentioned that no such class existed. This assertion was persisted in until it became ludicrous. To-day the fashion is come to regard this class as exceptional so far as the logic of the Negro problem is concerned, dangerous so far as social peace is concerned, and its existence more than offset by an abnormal number of criminals, degenerates and defectives.

Right here, then, comes the center of the present problem, namely: What is the *truth* about this? What are the real facts? How far is Negro crime due to inherited and growing viciousness and how far to poverty, degradation and systematic oppression?

How far is Negro labor lazy and how far is it the listless victim of systematic theft?

How far is the Negro woman lewd and how far the helpless victim of social custom?

How far are Negro children being educated to-day in the public schools of the South and how far is the effort to curtail that training increasingly successful?

How far are Negroes leaving the farms and rushing to the cities to escape work and how far to escape slavery?

How far is this race designated as Negroes the descendants of African slaves and how far is it descended from the most efficient white blood of the nation?

What does actual physical and social measurement prove as to the status of these descendants of black men?

All these are fundamental questions. Not a single valid conclusion as to the future can be absolutely insisted upon without definite skillful scientific answers to these questions and yet not a single systematic effort to answer these questions on an adequate scale has been made in these United States from 1619 to 1909. Not only this but on all sides opposition ranging from indifference and reluctance to actual force is almost universal when any attempt to study the Negro problem adequately is proposed. Yet in spite of this universal and deliberate ignorance the demand is made that one line of solution, which a number of good men have assumed is safe and sane, shall be accepted by everybody and particularly by thinking black men. The penalty for not accepting this programme is to be dubbed a radical, a busy-body, an impatient dreamer and a dangerous agitator. Yet this programme involves justification of disfranchisement, the personal humiliation of Jim-Crowism, a curtailed and purposely limited system of education and a virtual acknowledgment of the inevitable and universal inferiority of black men. And then in the face of this we are asked to look pleasant and do our very best. I think it is

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the most cowardly dilemma that a strong people ever thrust upon the weak. And I for one have protested and do protest and shall protest that in my humble opinion the assumption is an outrageous falsehood dictated by selfishness, cowardice and greed and for the righteousness of my cause and the proof of my assertions, I appeal to one arbitrament and one alone and that is: THE TRUTH.

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