

Letter from Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie to W.E.B. Du Bois, 1912?

DEAR SIR: I write to thank you for having said all you have in "The Souls of Black Folk." I have long wanted to grasp the Negro problem, and your prudent, balanced statement is very helpful. As I am a stranger, I must say what my point of view is. It is as an anthropologist and historian; my work for over thirty years has been digging up the civilization of Egypt. Many years ago, when president of the Anthropological Section, North British Association, I made native races the subject of that meeting, insisting on the iniquity of crushing lower civilizations by Europeanizing natives. Later I did the Huxley lectures on migrations, mapping all the movements from 0-1,000 A. D. in Europe. The subject of race mixture is of special interest to me, and only this autumn I was addressing London journalists on the subject by request. Excuse my saying so much, just to show you my standpoint: It is that of native culture and rights, without European uniformity.

Now I think it will be helpful to look at other cases which have some parallelism to the U. S. A. problem. Here in Egypt we have contact of many races. I will here only compare the native and the English. The difference of color is not much, a pure-bred Copt living indoors is lighter than I am living out of doors. There is no question of slavery giving a sense of inequality. There is no fear of yielding too much in a racial familiarity. All of these points are in favor of intercourse more than in U. S. A.

Yet the veil is almost as complete as you find it to be. There is practically no social intercourse. I only know of one house, long since closed, where an educated native could meet socially with educated Europeans. Officials of high standing may be invited just as officials, or very wealthy cosmopolitan natives because of their influence, but the well-educated native gentleman is unknown outside of his office. All English officials are required to travel first class to avoid even sitting with natives.

I only know of three mixed marriages with Christians. I doubt if the English partner was at all in the rim of society of her or his equals. Broadly, I should say that any marriage of English east of Greece would be a social bar; a Greek would be quite on the border line, depending on if they were brought up in England.

Now this being the case round the Mediterranean, how can you expect any better state of society in U. S. A.? The echo of slavery, the great difference of race and the pressure of the mulatto multitude must naturally make a thicker veil than even that of the Old World. I am not speaking personally in the least. I have had a black Indian parson living in my London house, for weeks, with the greatest pleasure to us all. I am just inviting a Japanese professor to stay. But, as Berkeley said, "The facts are as they are, and the consequences will be what they will be." The facts are that the English race all over the world insists on the veil; and, least of all in U. S. A., can you expect to find a more liberal exception. So much for our faults or peculiarities.

Now let me turn to the Englishman's objections to the native. These will not necessarily apply in any case to the U. S. A. difficulties, but they will show what over here gives substance to this veil. I write from thirty years of close intercourse with my own workmen, of whom I am personally very fond, and who will come and join me anywhere to work with us.

No Egyptian trusts another. Cheating over every transaction is the rule; an illiterate native expects to be cheated over every

railway ticket he takes, over any telegram he sends. I have constantly found gross imposition going on. You must be hammer or anvil; and the native official of the smallest kind will bully when he can, or else cringe. Honest, self-respecting men are rare to meet. As soon as a native thinks that you have any kindness or consideration for him he at once tries to turn it into solid benefits, without the least notion that his doing so destroys the bond. I have learned to keep two entirely different manners for my men; as helpful and friendly as can be outside of the work, but on work the disobedience or any lie or cheating means instant dismissal, and no man dares to plead for another. This is the only road to respect and popularity.

Education of book and memory sort is an injury in most cases. It depends on ancestry; the Arab is generally spoiled by it, the Copt, with a hundred generations of literary ancestors, is generally benefited. I should say that some technical and trade teaching and hygiene would benefit all. Not more than 5 per cent. would be the better for reading and writing, just to supply the minor official staff, but no useless subjects should be taught. Not more than one in 1,000 would really benefit by higher education. To give more only produces a moral deterioration. Little ignoramus, who are far below the ability of a small shopkeeper in England, will generally assume a complete equality, if not superiority, with a well-educated Englishman. It is their hopeless ignorance, which a little unfit schooling has only fostered. I often think that in England and elsewhere we most need in colleges a professor of ignorance, whose sole business would be showing the vast void in general knowledge, making students know how little they know, running over all the subjects that are not taught and making it felt how vast they are.

Perhaps you know that there is a profound unbelief in all our educational routine in England. Those who can detach themselves enough feel that much of the aim and more of the method is wrong. It is all constructed for easy examining wholesale. The head of one of our great universities said, after a talk about some cases: "Well, X makes one doubt whether education is of any good, after all." Education in the formal lines will no more clear the Negro problem than freedom or voting, and to hold it up as a certain panacea will only end in another collapse of deception.

Allow me to say -as a fellow teacher -what lines Egyptian experience would suggest. It may have a bearing on your problem.

Apart from reading the principles and underlying reasons of agriculture, elementary mechanics and the basis of political economy -that the maximum production must benefit all, and that production is more honorable than trading. For towns, mechanical teaching, instead of agriculture.

With reading, biography and history, rather than literature; lives such as Livingston and the engineers; later, Plutarch; of course, Bible is taken for granted. Later, history of nations, not politics or constitutions, but social and economic. An admirable book would be part of Martin Hume's "The Spanish People," 1901, showing how false economics, pride and bigotry utterly ruined Spain. Parts of Mommsen's "History of Rome," showing the hopeless decay of parties and the inevitableness of economic change, would be equally good. English history is less useful, because it does not yet cross such great economic collapses as those of Spain and Italy, and the lessons which are most needed are not so obvious. All political ideals and figureheads should be kept in the background. We want men to make the most of the earth, before they are fired to waste themselves and their fellows in vain vaporings by reading of Gracchus or Washington. I doubt if any political agitation has ever gained as much as it has wasted.

Now another line as to what may perhaps be the ultimate result of the Negro problem.

In Europe all migration for a thousand years was from the East; yet the color map of Europe shows an even grading from the tow-haired blonde of the North to the curly black hair and black eyes of the South. Climate has completely conquered race. In no land have two different races existed side by side for 1,000 years without fusion. I cannot therefore doubt that a thousand years hence there will be an evenly graded American, from a white North to a black South. The only rational course is to help nature and make it easy for inevitable changes to take place. How can this be done?

First the whites must be bought out, beginning with a State where there are fewest. In Ireland the policy of the last ten

years has largely succeeded, of a government loan to buy out landlords (at twentytwo years net rental), and to let to the tenant under government at a rental which will give proprietorship to the next generation. The educated men accustomed to business that are needed to carry out the details of management should be the successful Negroes of the North. Such a policy steadily carried on at every opportunity that offers, without any violence, would soon transform a State; the more were bought out the more would wish to leave. Looking at the rate of change in Ireland, I expect that the whole change in U. S. A. might be got through in a century, perhaps quicker.

Of course, all land acquired thus must be inalienable, especially to Russian Jews. A law that no colored man can raise money on security of land or stock would settle that. In Egypt the money lender was an awful curse. It was the extortions of Greek usurers that caused the Arabi rebellion. Mommsen gives an awful picture of the wreck of the world caused by Roman usurers. Here the matter has been set pretty straight by a government agricultural bank, which lends at low interest on land or crops. If the borrower fails, another native gets in, and the foreign leech is kept away. You would need such an agricultural bank to get rid of "furnishing" and "cropping."

In short, the example of other countries points to the policy of securing a State or a part of a State, solid black, no profits going to white men. Put all the pride of the Negro people into bringing that into the most successful economic condition possible. Make the prosperity of it the ambition of every Negro in U. S. A.; extend this system by land purchase and agricultural banks as quickly as it succeeds, but never in advance of the solid economic stability of what is already in hand. Leave politics entirely alone until economic success is assured. When such a State is in flourishing order, then its black leaders will take their seats at Washington like any other State representatives. To concentrate the Negro aspirations on steady economic success in their own hands seems -from the example of other lands -to be the real solution of the miserable result of past crimes.

I trust that you will forgive this intrusion of one who can only look on from a distance; but the comparison with proven conditions in other cases may have its uses. The one great lesson which all history seems to me to teach is that character and economics are the only real forces. No laws or politics can stop their action; and the hindrances which false legislation may impose for a time are less loss in the long run than the economic waste of any violent action.

Believe me,

Yours truly,

W. M. Flinders Petrie.

Letter from W.E.B. Du Bois to Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, 1912?

My Dear Sir:

I thank you very much for your letter of January 3 and for your kind words concerning my book. You will also permit me, I know, to comment on some of the matters upon which you have touched in your letter.

The Englishman's objection to the native sounds very familiar to me. I can see nothing in the objection except the very human dislike for cheating and ignorance and lack of self-respect. This objection is worldwide and age old. The great point is, however, how to meet it, and I am sorry to see that apparently you sympathize with methods of meeting it which have been, to my mind, only too much in vogue during the world's history -the stern driving of men, the denial of education, and the general assumption that men must remain as they are for an indefinite time. To all these I take very serious exception.

The direction of human beings in their work and development calls for ability and firmness, but does not call for that attitude which the white European and the white American take toward colored races. That attitude does not in the long run succeed in getting out of colored labor anywhere near the best that is in it. It engenders hatred, it leads to caste and disaster, and while it is based on a difference of character, it very easily is used on occasions when the only difference is a difference of color or form of nose.

In the matter of education, again I think you make a mistake in common with the modern white world. What you say concerning the spoiling of primitive peoples by education is exactly the same thing that was said and is said in the United States. To educate the Negro was to spoil the plough hand. Educated Negroes never could amount to anything, etc. I know distinctly

in my own case that there was strong advice given my parents and my people against educating me, and if your ideas had been carried out in the United States -and there are many people trying to carry them out -I should not be having the pleasure of communicating with you now. On the contrary, I should probably be the victim of that "manner" which you use to your underlings in Egypt. Whenever one tries by form of education to raise a people the percentage of failure and mistake is going to be large, but such failure is no argument against the attempt, and, on the whole, it has been possible in the past, and it is possible to-day by means of education, to enable a group to take a short cut across a thousand years of human culture and do in a generation what their fathers did in three or ten.

I have seen in the Negro race here in America a good many cases of moral deterioration arising from education. It has been proverbial in the United States, not simply with colored people, but with white people, that the "second generation" is very apt to be spoiled, sometimes utterly ruined. But this is no argument against education. I know, of course, that the people in England are revolting against the English method of education, and in that they show their sense. There is a large revolt in the United States. Our methods of education have got to be improved undoubtedly, but that does not mean that the basis of education will not be in the future, as it has been to some extent in the past, the training of thought and ability by means of the truth.

As to the course of study which you lay down for Egyptians, and which is quite similar to that which some people would lay down for my people in the United States, I object to it. I do not believe that "production" is more honorable than trade. Trade is production. I do not believe

that any agricultural caste should be trained, and I do not believe that politics should be left out of the course of training. My thesis is proven, it seems to me, by applying it to the future of the Negro of the United States.

You believe that the best thing would be a sort of segregation of the black population in a few States, so that from this population would have a chance to develop to its best unhampered, and yet you wish that population to have no education in politics and to leave politics alone. This seems to me a most remarkable prediction. How is this State to support itself, to think its way through its great social problems, to supply itself with a governing class, and do the thousand and one things that a modern State ought to do, if its folks have no education in politics? Moreover, if this people do all these things, what is going to keep them from becoming the victims of the greed of their white neighbors just as soon as they have anything that those white neighbors want? Or, in other words, you suppose on the part of white people an unselfishness and a desire to guide and help other races which white people have never exhibited, save in very exceptional and individual cases. On the whole, their conduct with other people has been about as disgraceful a chapter in history as history affords.

Almost everything that you propose should be done for the colored people in this segregation they are already doing for themselves. They are buying land, and buying it without Government intervention, although Government intervention would greatly help them. They already have some forty banks which are supplying capital in small amounts, and they have, thank God, in spite of advice, too much sense to let politics alone, and it is their political power alone that keeps them from sinking to the state of the Egyptian fellahin.

I know you will pardon this frank expression of my views.

I beg to remain,

Very sincerely yours,

W. E. B. Du Bois.

Letter from Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie to W.E.B. Du Bois, 1912?

* * * Now, you propose to quote some of my letter. So far as you may agree with any of it, pray do so. But I should be very sorry to appear as if defending a state of feelings and relations which I was only describing to you in order to point out that it is general, and not peculiar to your difficulties. I do not wish, therefore, to be put forward as opposed to any of the activities which you so earnestly desire. With my sincerest wishes for your progress in the great cause,

Believe me,

Yours very sincerely,

W. M. Flinders Petrie.