The Social Evolution of the Black South

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I HAVE worded the subject which I am going to treat briefely in this paper; "The Social Evolution of the Black South," and I mean by that, the way in which the more intimate matters of contact of Negroes with themselves and with their neighbors have changed in the evolution of the last half century from slavery to larger freedom. It will be necessary first in order to understand this evolution to remind you of certain well known conditions in the South during slavery. The unit of the social system of the south was the plantation, and the plantation was peculiar from the fact that it tended to be a monarchy and not an aristocracy.

In the early evolution of England we find men of noble and aristocratic birth continually rising and disputing with the monarch as to his arbitrary power and finally gaining, in the case of Magna Carta, so great influence as practically to bind the monarch to their will. In France on the other hand we find continually a tendency for monarchs like Louis XIV to gain such power that they forced even the aristocracy to be their sycophants, and men who, like the rest of the monarch's subjects had no rights which the monarch was bound to respect.

We must now remember that the little plantations which formed the unit of the social life in the South before the war tended continually to the French model of Louis XIV and went in many cases far beyond it, so that the ruler of the plantation was practically absolute in his power even to the matter of life and death, being seldom interfered with by the state. While, on the other hand, the mass of field hands were on a dead level of equality

with each other and in their surbordination to the owners power. This does not mean that the slaves were consequently unhappy or tyranized over in all cases, it means simply what I have said, they were at practically the absolute mercy of the owner. The real owner could be a beneficent monarch -and was in some cases in the South -or he might be the brutal, unbridled tyrant -and was in some cases in the South. Just where the average lay between these two extremes is very difficult to determine with any degree of accuracy but the experience of the world leads us to believe that abuse of so great power was in a very large number of cases inevitable.

Turning now to this great army of field hands we find them usually removed one or two degrees from the ear of the monarch by the power of the overseer and his assistants. Here again was a broad gate way for base and petty tyranny. The social life on the plantation, *that is*, the contact of slave with slave was necessarily limited. There was the annual frolic culminating in "the Christmas"; and there was usually a by-weekly or monthly church service. The frolic tended gradually to demoralization for an irregular period, longer or shorter, of dissipation and excess. Historically it was the American representative of the dance and celebration among African tribes with however, the old customary safeguards and traditions of leadership almost entirely gone, only the dance and liquor usually remained. The church meeting on the plantation was, in its historical beginning, the same. Just as the Greek dance in the theatre was a species of a religious observance in its origin and indeed in its culmination so the African dance differentiated: Its fun and excesses went into the more or less hidden night frolics; while its tradition and ceremony was represented in the church services and veneered with more or less Christian elements. Of the distinctly family social life. The whole tendency of the plantation was to leave less and less.

Polygamy was established and to some extent encouraged into the West Indies and its opposite was not systematically frowned upon in America, and there was neither time nor place for family ceremonial. There was a common sleeping place more or less confined to a family; a common eating place but few family celebrations. Sometimes there was a ceremony of marriage but

this was an exception among the field hands. There was certainly no ceremony of divoree and little authority over children. The whole tendency of the plantation was toward communism of eating, children and property. -Facts which show their definite results among us to-day -some good and some bad. The beautiful hospitality, for instance, among our poorest Negroes and the willing adoption of orphan children is balanced against bad systems of eating and living and illegitimate births. In and over all these plantation organizations there must of course have arisen that thing so characteristic of monarchal power, namely, the tale bearer and the thief. The man who curries favor by telling on the neighbors, and the man who having no chance to earn what he wants, steals it. From tale-bearing and deception on the one hand and unusual ability and adaptability on the others there arose from the dead level of the plantation field hands two classes of incipient aristocracy, namely, the artisan and the house-servant. The artisan by natural and acquired manual and mental dexterity coupled with more or less keenness of mind became a slave of special value. On his ability the whole plantation to a large extent depended. He built the houses, he repaired them, made and repaired most of the tools, arranged the crops for market; manufactured the rolling stock. As the plantations increased and were systematized he became so valuable that he was an article of special barter and could by shrewdness himself dictate often the terms of his use. Many stringent laws were mimed against him to keep him from becoming too independent. Nevertheless he increased in numbers and sometimes bought his own freedom. In many cases he acquired property. He was demanded in large and larger numbers in the cities and he formed a growing problem of the slave system. He is the direct ancestor of the city Negro. Side by side with the slave mechanic and in some cases identical with him arose the house-servants; as the mechanic gained his power by ability and economic demand the house-servant gained a more tremendous and dangerous power by personal contact until on some plantations it was actually a question as to whether the master would rule his servants or his servants rule him, but when such a statement is made it must be interpreted as applying to the house-servant and the house-servants were but a small per cent of

the total number of slaves; because the house-servant gained very intimate knowledge and opportunity to serve the good will and even the affection of the master or to pander to his vices and because too from the house-servants the great amalgamation of the races took place so that the servant was often blood relative of the master. In this way the house-servant became even a more dangerous person than the mechanic. -More dangerous because he could command a more careful protection of his master a more intimate protection, and because he inevitably had chances for education which the mechanic did not. When therefore, emancipation came it found the cultured house-servant further on the road to civilization, followed by the less cultured but more effectual artisan and both dragged down by the great unnumbered weight of largely untouched field hands. The great change which freedom brought to the plantation was the right of emigration from one plantation to another but this right was conceded by no means everywhere and is not even until this very day. Gradually, however large and larger numbers of field hands changed plantations or migrated to town. In the change of plantations they slowly but surely improved the rate of compensation and conditions of work, on the other hand, they remained and still remain so far as they stayed on the plantations, a

backward uneducated class of servants except where they have been able to buy land. And even there they have become efficient, pushing and rising only in cases where they have education of some degree. Now it was the Negro that migrated to town that got a chance for education, both in early days and largely so to-day In town he met the school and the results of the school, i. e., he himself learned to read and write and he came in more or less contact with the things and influence of men who had learned more than mere reading and writing. We must then if we would know the social condition of the Negro to-day turn our attention to this city group. No matter how much we may believe the country the place for the Southern Negro or stress its certain advantages to him there, the sad truths remains that the black man who can take advantage of these opportunities is represented in the country districts in very small numbers and cannot under present circumstances be represented by larger numbers save through conscientious,

systematic group effort. It is the city group of Negroes, therefore that is the most civilized and advancing and it is that group whose social structure we need to study. It is in the south above all a segregated group, and this means that it is the group that lives to itself, works by itself worships alone and finds education and amusement among its own. This segregation is growing, and its growth involves two things true in all evolution processes, namely, greater differentiation and greater integration. Greater differentiation from the white group in, for instance, the schools of the city which it inhabits, the interests which attract it; the ideals which inspire it and the traditions which it inherits. On the other hand greater integration in the sense of stronger self consciousness, more harmonious working together with a broader field for such co-operation. We often compare the North and South with regard to these things and pointing to the tremendous co-operation of the southern city group we urge the Northern group to follow its foot-steps without stopping to think that tremendous and even harsh differentiation must precede and accompany all such integration and in so far as that differentiation is absent in the North, it is this absence here that it gives a chance for a slower but larger integration in the North which may in the long run, and already has, helped the smaller intenser integration of the black Southern group. Now to illustrate just what I mean by the integral life of the Southern group let me point the possibilities of a black man in a city like Atlanta to-day. He may arise in the morning in a house which a black man built and which he himself owns; it has been painted and papered by black men; the furniture was probably bought at a white store, but not necessarily, and if it was, it was brought to the house by a colored draman; the soap with which he washes might have been bought from a colored drug store; his provisions are bought at a Negro grocery; for the most part his morning paper is delivered by a colored boy; he starts to work walking to the car with a colored neighbor and sitting in a part of the car surrounded by colored people; in most cases he works for white men, but not in all he may work for a colored man or a colored family; even if he works for a white man his fellow workmen with whom he comes in contact are all colored; with them he eats

his dinner and returns home at night; once a week he reads a colored paper; he is insured in a colored insurance company; he patronizes a colored school with colored teachers, and a colored church with a colored preacher; he gets his amusements at places frequented and usually run by colored people; he is buried by a colored undertaker i na colored grave-yard. In his section of the city few or no white people live, consequently his children grow up with colored companions; in his home a white person seldom if ever enters; all the family meals, amusements and ceremonies are among his own people. Now such a situation means more than mere separation from white people; it means, as I have intimated before, not simply separation but organized provision for the service of this colored group. The group must see to

it that religion, education, amusements, etc., are furnished its members, and while some of these things are left to chance more and more such groups are conscientiously exerting themselves to provide for themselves in these ways and this is what I mean by integration. The place, however, where the separation cannot be made perfect is in matters of work in economic co-operation and here the Negro in this city group occupies one of two very different positions: he may be and often is one of those who is engaged in service which the group as such demands, i. e., a teacher, a lawyer, a physician, a druggist, an artisan whose clients are colored or a servant for colored people. This group of employees are growing rapidly but it is a small group and a group naturally paid relatively small wages. On the other hand, the great mass of this city group are persons whose employment makes them a part of the whole economic organization of the South and Nation. These are the great mass of laborers, porters, servants and artisans. Their contact with the white group is considerable and constant and in that contact enters and necessitates continual existence of social intercourse. It is here that the great battle of the race question is being fought. But fought as you will perceive, not by the most highly educated and able members of the group but, usually, by the middle class workingman and very often too the tendency is rather to separate that group of men from its natural intellectual leaders; This in the Southern city group of yesterday was possible, but is to-day being made more

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The chief results among both black and whites is evidence of peculiar moral strain. A strain which does not always voice itself; indeed which finds it difficult to choose words, but a strain nevertheless which is manifested in a hundred different ways. Both white men and black men try to hide it. Ask a black man about conditions in the South and he is evasive; he speaks upon this and that pleasant point but of the whole situations of the general trend he does not wish to speak, or if he does speak his speech is difficult to understand. Precisely the same thing in differing ways is true of the white man, and it leaves the outside spectator peculiarly puzzled. The fact is that both black and white in the South endure the present pain and bitterness but see a wonderful vision. The black man endures segregation and personal humiliation but sees the development and unfolding of a human group, one of the most fascinating and inspiring of spectacles,

compromise

Among the first of these three attitudes is the wily and oily orator who attends Northern chatauquas and tells of his love for his black mammy; the brutal hot-headed brawler and lyncher who wants to fight a desperate cause bnt takes it out in fighting the helpless; and finally the man who typifies what is called the "silent South". On the part of the Negro there are avowed also the three types: tee wiley and crafty man who tells the North and the Negro of the kindness of the South and advance of the black man; the fighter who complains or shoots or migrates; and the silent sensitive black man who suffers but says nothing. Now of these three types I am free to say that the one of whom I hope most is the white brawler and the black fighter; I mean by that not that lynching is not horrible and fighting terrible but I do mean that these are types of men of a certain rough honesty.

Your Tillmans and your Vardamans represent a certain disgusting but honest ignorance which acts upon its information and some day when it gets the right information it is going to act right. On the other hand, I believe that at the end of the devious way of the cempromiser and

liar lies moral death.

I do not believe that the systematic deception concerning the the situation in the South either on the part of white men or black men will in the long-run help that situation a single particle.

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