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THE TRUTH ABOUT LYNCHING

ITS CAUSES AND EFFECTS BY ASA PHILIP RANDOLPH

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Truth About Lynching

By Asa Philip Randolph

To begin with, what is a lynching?

Lynching, historically speaking, is a loose term applied to various forms of executing popular justice, or what is thought to be justice. It is the punishment of offenders by a summary procedure, ignoring and contrary to the strict forms of law. In short, the essence of lynching is that it is extralegal.

What is its history?

In early Colonial days lynching had been practised. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the American population expanded westward faster than well-defined civil institutions could follow, and the western frontiers were infested with desperadoes who preyed upon the better classes. To suppress these miscreants, in the absence of strong legal institutions, resort was continually made to lynch law. We had instances of lynching in New England and the middle colonies in the mistreatment of the Indians and the wanton disregard of the laws protecting them. Of course, it must be remembered that it was not until 1830 that lynching was associated with and connoted killing. There was a custom in various colonies of administering summary justice to wife-beaters and idlers. The acts of the Regulators of North Carolina in 1767-71, the popular tribunal of the Revolutionary period, when the disaffection against Great Britain weakened the authority of civil government at a time when the hostilities between Patriots and Tories were an incentive to extra-legal violence. In the South lynching was long employed in dealing with agitators, white and black, who were charged with inciting Negro slaves to riot. The Ku Klux Klan, the White Cappers and Red Shirts applied the lynch law. It is, typically, an American institution, though Russia and southern Europe have practised it. So much then for an historical survey of lynching.

Now, then, the next question which logically arises is: What are its causes? And this question is timely, and in point, in view of the utter lack and dire need of information by the American nation on this vital question, big with social interest and dangers for the entire country.

All of us are agreed that lynching is wrong, that it is a crime and that it ought to be stopped; even our Southern white brothers are beginning to see this but few of us have very carefully and critically examined into the causes of and remedies for this social phenomenon. And, yet, scientific method that before prescribing for any disease, whether physical, mental or a cautious and scientific inquiry should be made into the cause of the . Because in order to understand how to eradicate the effects, you the cause of said effects, and proceed to remove the cause. To A community is situated beside a swampy marsh where poisonous

vapors hover over the putrid, pestiferous, standing waters, and where various disease germs and mosquitoes in fest.

The people of this community suffer continually from malarial fever. Scientists have determined that the mosquito is a carrier of malarial germs. Now, is it not logical to assume that the swampy marsh is the cause of the malady and the mosquito but the occasion, and in order to wipe out the effects it is necessary to remove the cause of the occasion -the marsh?

Then, this is no less true of lynching than of any other disease or social evil, such as child labor, white slavery, intemperance, poverty and criminal acts in general.

For clarity of exposition I shall divide the causes into two classes, viz.: the indirect or final cause and the proximate, direct or efficient cause.

Now, before proceeding to build our structure of the true, positive causes of lynching, we shall do the excavation work of clearing away the debris of alleged but fallacious causes.

First, it is maintained by some that race "prejudice" is the cause. But the fallacy of this contention is immediately apparent in view of the fact that out of 3,337 persons lynched between 1882 and 1903, there were 1,192 white persons.

Second, it is held by others that "rape" of white women is the real cause. Again this argument is untenable when it is known that out of the entire number of persons lynched only 34 per cent. can be ascribed to rape as the cause.

Third, still others contend that the "law's delay" is the controlling cause. This also is without force when the fact is known that men have been lynched after they have had their day in court and despite the fact that they (the accused) were convicted or acquitted. Leo Frank is an instance in proof. Thus much for what are not some of the causes of lynching.

We shall consider now the real and positive causes of this evil. There are three cardinal reasons, viz., the economic, political and social.

First, what are the economic causes? By economic causes, I mean material gains which are the motor-forces of individual and social actions. For instance: A Jewish and an Irish lad were fighting and they were calling each other all kinds of humiliating names. Presently, along came two passers-by who speculated as to the cause of the fight, giving various religious and sentimental reasons. But upon inquiry they were informed by the Irish lad that the d -Jew had his foot on his nickle. Thus you see, not race nor religion, but the crass, materialistic, economic factor -the nickle -was the sound reason for the scrap.

As to our first proposition, the economic cause. I maintain that the capitalist system is the fundamental cause of lynching. By the term capitalist system, I mean, in short, the exploitation of human labor-power and the natural resources of the country for private profits.

This is a system under which the tools with which the laborer works and the raw material upon which he works are owned by private individuals. Now our capitalist system expresses itself in different forms in different sections of the country. For instance, in the East manufactories, railroads and steamships

are the paramount economic factors; in the West, mining, railroads and steamships, and in the South cotton plantations, lumber mills, turpentine, and railroads. The banking institutions of the South, which extend the loans to poor white and black farmers, are the channels through which the commodities of the industries find their way to their local, national and world

markets. Out of these industrial arrangements have grown certain socio-economic conditions, namely, peonage, the crop-lien system, tenantfarming and peasantry, which are the more immediate causes of lynching.

First, what is peonage? Peonage is a system of serfdom, the principle of which is, that if an employee owes his master he must continue to serve him until the debt is paid, the only escape being that if another employer is willing to come forward and assume the debt the employee is allowed to transfer his obligation to the new master. In practice the system amounts to vassalage, inasuch as the debt is usually allowed to reach a figure which there is no hope of paying off.

Now how is this system maintained? During the Reconstruction Period the Negro tasted and became intoxicated with the new wine of freedom and was loath to return to the farm, under conditions, in many instances, worse than slavery. Unsophisticated Negroes looked wistfully for the promised "mule aand forty acres." But lumber must be cut, cotton must be picked and turpentine must be dipped. In short, profits must be made. Negroes must work or be made to work, besides they must work cheaply.

Thus the "black code" and vagrancy laws of the South. These laws provided for the imprisonment of all Negroes who had no visible means of support. The result is that, hordes of unemployed Negroes are hustled off to jail and the convict camps. Their fines are paid by the lumber, cotton and turpentine operators; they are assigned into their custody; put to work at starvation wages, besides being compelled to trade at the company's store, which prevents their ever getting out of debt. They are also compelled to sign certain labor contracts, the non-performance of which is proof presumptive of fraudulent intent at the time of making it, which the state laws make a crime. And as a white planter himself tells the story: A planter can arrest a man upon the criminal charge of receiving money under false pretenses, which is equivalent to the charge of stealing; you get him convicted; he is fined, and being penniless, in lieu of the money to pay the fine he goes to jail; then you pay the fine and costs and the judge assigns him to you to work out the fine and you have him back on your plantation, backed up by the authority of the state. This is peonage. It is an economic system. It is maintained for profits.

We pass next to the crop-lien system. The crop-lien system is the method of mortgaging the planted and unplanted crops of the poor farmers. It operates in this way: The poor farmers are in need of provisions until harvesting time; the white merchants supply them for a part of their crop -the share usually being so large as to keep -a perpetual lien on the farmers crops. Under this system the Negroes are fastened to the farms.

The Negro farmer, being in debt, cannot leave. To escape is to violate a contract; to violate a contract is to commit a crime which might result in being remanded to the convict camps or lynched. Next we shall consider tenant-farming, which is explained by its title.

Usually, however, the tenant-farmer has been a farm owner who, due to the crop-lien system, has lost control of the said farm. The next stage of the tenant-farmer is the farm laborer, which is the final goal of the poor white and black farmer in the South. Thus an economic system which makes peasants out of the Negroes and poor whites. In the South a peasant is an object of reproach, the scum -the flotsam and jetsam of society. They are illiterate, morally depraved and physically broken. The fruits of this system are prejudice, jim-crow, segregation and lynching. Banking institutions and loan agencies supply the money for the maintenance at rates of interest as high as 60 and 100 per cent on the dollar.

Negroes don't protest or resist because they are intimidated and cowed by lynching bees. Negroes and poor whites don't unite -unite against a common exploiter -because race prejudice exists and is artfully cultivated to keep them apart. The weapons of capital in other parts of the country are: The state militias, secret-detective-strike-breaking agencies, religion or nationality. So that in the East and West we have our Bayonne, West Virginia and Ludlow, and in the South we have our Waco and Memphis horrors. Of more recent date we have the East St. Louis massacre, the cause of which is fundamentally economic. Negro laborers were imported into the above-named place to work. They were either imported to take the jobs of white workers or to increase the supply of labor, and thereby force down wages. This was the real cause of the conflict.

This is similar to the principle of picketing by labor unions. White laborers will not only shoot down Negro laborers but also white laborers who are imported by capitalists to take their jobs or lower their wages. Such is the history of the labor movement in this country. Negro laborers would do the same thing if they were in the white laborers' places.

We might as well meet the big, bald fact that self interest is the Supreme Ruler of the actions of men. The reason does not lie in race prejudice, but in the class struggle. Blame your capitalist system. Of course, this does not justify or expiate the crime; it simply explains it. Certainly the culprits should be brought to justice. We also have had a race riot in London, the roots of which go back to our capitalist system. The association with white women was but the occasion, of the London race riot.

We come now to the political cause of lynching. The "black code" and vagrancy laws, whose purpose I have aforementioned, were enacted by white men who, through political activities, gained their places in the legislative halls of the state. The laws which make the non-performance of labor contracts a crime are placed on the statute books by certain anti-labor and incidentally anti-Negro politicians. The sheriffs of the counties into whose custody Negroes charged with criminal acts are placed, are nominated and elected by political parties. The parties are controlled by certain financial forces which lend money to poor white and black farmers at extortionate rates of interest. The lumber mills, cotton and turpentine interests, big depositors of the banks, shape and control the policy of those financial institutions. The political parties respond to the pressure of finance; the representatives of the parties (not the people) in the legislative bodies, respond to the parties and hence we have our anti-Negro, anti-labor legislation in the South. Political parties in the South, as in the North, are extra-legal organizations composed of citizens who are controlled by moneyed interests.

So that when a mob demand a Negro in the custody of a sheriff nominated and elected by a political machine whose campaign funds are made up by the banks and loan agencies which lend money to poor whites and Negroes at usurious rates of interest, you can realize and appreciate the result, the manner in which the said sheriff will act. Self-interest is the controlling principle of an individual's or a community's action, unless the actor in question is either ignorant or insane. Thus a sheriff can always be expected to act in the interest of those who have the power to remove him from his place. Not until you shift the seat of political control can you depend upon those in authority to act differently. No sane man can be expected to act against his own interest. We can no longer depend upon the "good man" theory. It has long since been exploded. We have got to adopt a system which will make it unprofitable to be otherwise. Now, the Republican and Democratic parties in the South are controlled by the same money forces. They are a bi-partisan machine which reflect the policies and interests of

the paramount economic forces there -cotton, railroads, turpentine, lumber, and the bourgeoisie merchants. In the East and West these parties reflect the policies and interests of oil, steel, coal, railroads and manufacturing.

Another political course of lynching stated negatively is, disfranchisement, whose tentacles, like a mighty octopus, strangle the voice of protest in the throats of the common people. Intelligent Negroes are without voice, notwithstanding the fact that they pay taxes. Moreover, but one-third of the whites of voting age vote in the South. Evidently the uncrowned financial kings of the South find it more advantageous to rule by an electoral minority because it can be more easily bribed and handled than a large mass of voters. Again, too often, has a young white man's political promotion depended upon his scurrilous harrangues against the Negro.

We come now to the social causes: The press, the church, the school system and the propinquity of the races. First, how has the press caused lynching? The Southern press has been controlled by the regnant economic forces in the South. Their editorial and news policies have been so adjusted as to suit the Southern plutocracy. Here, again, it is apparent that he who controls the bread and butter will also control and shape the ideas. Newspapers like the Atlanta Georgian have carried such headlines as: "A Subject for the Stake," "Lynch the Brute," "Lynch the Wretch." During the Atlanta Race Riot, September 22, 1906, the Atlanta Evening News carried inflammatory headlines which fanned the fires of race prejudice.

Second, the church is the recipient of large contributions from the financial rulers of the South and naturally preach the Christianity of profits.

In very truth the beneficiaries of a system cannot be expected to destroy it. Hence, the Methodist Church split over the issue of slavery (which was an economic question pure and simple) into North and South, in 1860. The Church of the South prayed and preached for the victory of the cotton kings. The church of the North blessed and anointed the industrial capitalists.

Third, the most important social institution in the South is controlled by legislators who are controlled by political parties which are, in turn, controlled by financial lords who regard it safer and more profitable to keep the common people, white and black, in virtual ignorance and superstition, because ignorant people don't strike for higher wages and better working conditions. So that the school terms, in some parts of the South, last for

only three months. The educational appropriation of the Southern states is the lowest paid of any section in the country. The slave states appropriate \$2.22 for each Negro pupil per year and \$4.92 for each white.

This but indicates the low social state of both races in the South.

Fourth, the propinquity of the races in the South has, undoubtedly, operated to accentuate the feeling of race prejudice.

This doubtless is due to the extreme oppositeness of physical characteristics. Of course the racial differences are not a cause, but an occasion for race strife. The social mind of the South is the product of a peculiar environment. For instance, the social heritage of slavery and the Reconstruction Period still rankles in the bosom of Southern society. And the attack by a Negro upon a white person, the doctrine that the Negro is a hewer of wood and a drawer of water; the Biblical citation of Canaan in proof; the doctrine of the white man's superiority preached by political, religious and journalistic demagogues to the poor, ignorant whites; the doctrine of the sacredness of the Southern white woman shown by the Southern white man's chivalry toward

her in public conveyances, combined with the ignorance and superstition of the common whites and blacks, have a tremendous psychological and emotional power in occasioning lynching. I say occasioning because the cause lies deeper. They are the fuse. The magazine is the capitalist system. Most anything in the South may be the occasion of a lynching. It may be a "well dressed" Negro in country districts, the use of the word "yes" by a Negro to a white man, asking a white woman for the name of a street, the fighting of a colored and a white boy, and the use of good English to white folks. A very conspicuous characteristic of the South is its hypersensitiveness. There still persists the duel. Homicides are more numerous than in any other part of the country. When the sister of a young white man or the daughter of a father is fooled by another white man, seldom is recourse made to courts, but the accused is usually shot down like a dog in the open streets.

The results are that the auto-suggestion of a community when it hears of a crime, is to form itself into a mob and to commit murder, burn human beings and raze houses until it has avenged the crime. The philosophy of the mob is, that present crime will avenge past crime, and prevent future crime, which, needless to say, history has shown to be erroneous. The effects are, that in some parts of the South a state of lawlessness exists and mob law invariably rules. Negroes, innocent and guilty alike, are hated, hounded and hunted by white men and women momentarily transformed into beasts. The educational system is demoralized. The pulpit, that erstwhile eminence of sacredness, is used as a promontory from which to hurl incendiary diatribes against the Negro. The press, that paladium of human liberties, is used as the channel through which journalistic adders vent their venomous spleen to poison the currents of public opinion. Political demagogues use the ballot, the mightiest of the ages, to fasten the fetters of disfranchisement upon the blacks and poor whites. In the Southern South revenge has become the civic motive. And when such is the case a just proportion between crime and penalty cannot long be maintained, and every citizen, black and white, becomes exposed to the passions of the crowd. Penalty therefore ceases to be a curative of evil and becomes the instrument of hatred. Tiberius Gracchus would have rendered Rome a nobler service had he fostered only sound

motives of government, but he sought to avenge the wrong done his partisans rather than to correct them, he introduced violence into the elections, which started a flow of blood which made the land incarnadine and destroyed the very government he sought to save. When revenge became the motive in France liberty became the patron of crime and murder became a sport. So the terrible fruits of lynching must inevitably appear in the insecurity of the social order it claims to defend. Courts in the South have degenerated into a machinery for wreaking vengeance upon citizens, and the verdicts of juries are the passions of the mob instead of the voice of justice. Finally, the effect is that the civilized world looks upon American democracy as a mockery.

The conditions are that white men and black men and white women and black women are unconsciously treading upon the crater of a social volcano whose molten lava of class passions, emotions and race hatred threaten to drench the land in blood; to wash away the dykes of our false civilization; to sweep on in its course the derelict kings of capitalism and the slimy and poisonous germs of race prejudice and to erect upon the ruins thereof a new civilization, a new democracy, a new humanity, fortified and armed with universal suffrage and universal education.