

This Race Problem

Claude McKay

SEGREGATION, especially in housing, is merely a part of the larger issue which Negroes must face. That issue is discrimination. And just so long as the Negro, with his white friend, makes segregation the main issue, he'll remain confused and impotent before the varied forms of discrimination.

When the Negro thinks of segregation he imagines the entire white world arrayed especially against him. But that is not fact. Among white people themselves the world is "segregated" as much as it is for the Negro. The masses of Italians, Poles, Irish, Jews and other racial groups live more or less unto themselves. Why? There are various reasons. Some superficial commentators declare that language is the link. But how can that explain the situation? The Irish have long spoken English. The Jews follow the language of the country in which they reside. The real difference between the conditions among such groups and the Negroes is that the well-to-do whites are in position to move at any time so as to live among the sons and daughters of the American Revolution. As to the Negroes, no matter how cultured and educated they may be,

Unless our discriminatory tax laws are changed or sufficient land is acquired by the Negroes to insure their social freedom, the heinous system of segregation will continue to thwart the progress of the race

American race prejudice compels them to reside among their own people.

Naturally the cry for doing away with segregation, especially in housing, rises in strength mostly from Negroes in the higher income brackets, whose salaries range from \$2000 to \$12,000 a year. If this group were numerous enough it could probably find salubrious residential areas for itself and possibly induce its white friends of kindred spirit, who also decry Negro segregation, to reside with it!

SOCIAL SCIENTISTS—both liberals and radicals—confronted with a Negro minority, must realize that they are not merely up against a social but also a psychological phenomenon. The Negro minority is taboo! And in that sense this country is closer to the Asiatic than to the European state of mind.

Perhaps the country suffering from racial conditions most like those exist-

*WITH the exception of Booker T. Washington's *Biography*, Claude McKay's novel, *Home to Harlem* (Harper, 1929), was the first best seller by a Negro author. So dynamic was the book's appeal that it was translated into French, Spanish, Italian and Russian. Mr. McKay is also author of *Bonjo* and *Spring in New Hampshire*, as well as several other books of poetry. Born in Jamaica, West Indies, he came to the United States, attended Tuskegee Institute and for two years studied at Kansas State College. At present, Mr. McKay is engaged in research work for the Catholic Youth Organization.

ing in the United States is India, where there are the Untouchables. The percentage of special victims is about the same—about one-tenth of the population. Gandhi, as leader of the Indian Revolutionary movement, has scathingly denounced the social caste system and treatment of the Untouchables. He has eaten, walked and talked with their leaders. His wife, however, never would, nor would the majority of his followers. And so the general racial pattern in India remains the same. It puts in the hands of the British rulers a formidable weapon against Gandhi and his movement for the freeing of India.

For Negroes and white sympathizers to depend for reform upon the purely social-political slogan, "segregation," seems futile to my mind. To whom are they appealing? To the poorer whites who will spend their last dollar in aping the well-to-do, but who do little to change their own segregated condition? Can we expect such whites to carry the battle against racial discrimination while the intellectual and prosperous sympathizers stay on the salubrious side of the fence?

Even the removal of restrictive covenants in property usage won't completely solve this problem. For no one can compel whites to live in a district or on a street where Negroes have moved. Nor can it be expected that the cultured and more intellectual Negroes will stay long among the less progressive families of their race. After all, in a free country both whites and Negroes should have the right to choose their surroundings and their

neighbors. Those families which are progressive will, under conditions of freedom, attract the friendship and society of others of like inclinations and interests—whether they are Negro or white.

The Negroes in the North feel that they have an additional weapon in their struggle for equality—the political weapon. Politicians of both parties begin to cater to the Negro vote when it becomes large enough to be a factor in elections. In this way the Negro race has become so powerful in some twelve Northern and border states that its vote is a determining factor in presidential, congressional and local elections. With this weapon the Negro may eventually force a measure of change in his social status and do so by legal means. But even then his situation will not be satisfactory. He must ultimately become a more progressive type of individual, thus rising above his traditional handicaps and environment.

Gunnar Myrdal, Swedish social economist, was sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation to make a five-year study of the Negro problem in the United States. His book *An American Dilemma*, published last year, is the result of his investigations. In this two-volume work he included my poem, "If We Must Die," and quoted from my other writings. This is one of his critical comments:

"Claude McKay is in error when he says: 'Segregation is a very unfortunate word. Not by the greatest flight of the imagination could Negro Harlem be considered a segregated area. Be-

sides the large percentage of whites doing business there, a large number of whites also reside there among the colored people. Harlem is more like an economically depressed area. In my last book I compared it to the servant quarters of a great estate. The servants live on the lower level, but they are not segregated.' "

The sloganeers may forever sing: "No segregation!" But there will be no permanent solution to the problem until the Negro makes himself so important as a group, in economic as well as in political ways, that segregation will be unprofitable.

Now, if one thumbs through the history of white minorities, one discovers that each minority group won a degree of economic and social privilege in the hard way. The Irish, Swedes, Finns, Russians, Rumanians, Poles, Spaniards, Italians, Greeks—all struggled against the harsh prejudices of some controlling group or nationality. And there is no reason to imagine that the Negro can win a wider share of American democracy in any but the hard way, that is—by sheer accomplishment.

I remember that in the nineteen thirties the movement to employ Negroes in other than menial jobs created a tense situation in Harlem. One of our young and popular agitators, now a member of Congress, demanded that the utility corporations having branches in the Negro districts provide better jobs for the Negroes. Our young friend was promptly informed that the employment policies of these corporations

excluded not only Negroes but also Jews and Catholics. How surprised was this educated Negro to learn the truth!

Just a little more social knowledge—which was quite possible for him—would have given him an understanding of the work problems of these corporations and have caused him to approach the subject in a more effective manner.

IN MY opinion the decisive will to end segregation and discrimination must develop among the Negroes themselves. They can create their own environment—either good or bad. So long as they fail to take the initiative in creating their own communities—if necessary from the ground up—they will be subject to exploitation by greedy whites and unscrupulous members of their own race.

The various ways in which the Negro is exploited may not be thoroughly understood by the public in general, but it is fairly well known that property values fall whenever Negroes begin to move into a district formerly occupied by whites. Superficially one would think that this would mean lower rents or cheaper investments in houses for the Negro. However, the reverse is the truth. Since the districts in which the Negroes are permitted to live are few in number and small in area, landlords quickly take advantage of the situation and rapidly increase rents. Because of low investments and negligible repairs, the landlords' costs are low, so he literally has a gold mine in the rental of prop-

erty to Negroes. Of course the only way the Negroes can pay the rents asked is for several families to live in the same one-family house or flat, or for large families to live in one room. Living conditions such as these are beyond endurance—and they are the basis of the discouragement which Negroes face.

The way out for the oppressed Negro lies in two directions: One avenue of relief is enough political power to destroy the property covenant system which "fences in" this minority group. The other road to freedom is the ownership—perhaps by cooperative means—of sufficient land to live in comfort and dignity. Ultimately land ownership is the real solution of the dilemma, for those who own the land "own the earth" and determine the conditions under which people may live.

If Negro leaders would rally their people to a fuller understanding of the power of the cooperative movement in this country and to an appreciation of the progress being made especially by cooperative housing enterprises, their people would soon grasp the opportunity to own the establishments in which they would want to live. They can also own and operate the stores in which to purchase food, clothing and other necessities.

In this way they could furnish employment to a large portion of the people in their own communities. Homesteading is just as attractive an opportunity for the Negro as it is for far-sighted white people, and there is nothing to keep Negroes from cooperating to bring about the development of an ideal community life.

I have no desire to rob the reformers of their pet theme and slogan "segregation." But we should remember that before the Civil War there was no race hatred in the United States. It was that war, with its consequent changing of political and economic conditions for the Negro, that created the system known as segregation. Once such a system became profitable to landed interests, it was promoted as a tradition to be respected. And this heinous system will continue to thwart the progress of the Negro unless either our discriminatory tax laws are changed or sufficient land is acquired by Negroes to insure their social freedom.

On the basis of mutual respect and economic justice, the white and Negro races can live in juxtaposition. Neither needs impose upon the other. For it is the right of all people, regardless of race or creed, that they shall have liberty and an untrammelled opportunity for the pursuit of happiness.



Says You

"To touch these wires is instant death. Anyone found doing so will be prosecuted."

Notice on an Irish rural electricity station