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CHAPTER XIII

WHITHER RACE RELATIONS? A CRITICAL COMMENTARY

ALAIN LOCKE

Fortunately the articles in this section on *Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations in the United States* are, on the whole, concise and objective, and accordingly, the obligation to summarize is minimal. The situation calls more for critical comment than elucidation, and above all, for some discussion of trends. The paramount need in these days of increased racial tension and of augmented interracial and international concern over the issues of race is to comprehend the major and important trends of thought and action involved. As an intellectual problem the primary demand is for clarification; and this, indeed, is probably the rôle of education in the situation and the main constructive contribution the educator can make to the total situation. There is as much need for the right perspective on these basic matters of human group relations as for the right information or even the right moral principles and convictions.

Fortunately, too, in this section, as indeed in the whole scope of this special issue of the JOURNAL, education is construed in its broadest sense. Much of the material reviewed would otherwise be irrelevant. But we are wisely coming more and more to regard the responsibility for the proper conditioning of individual and group opinion with regard to social attitudes and behavior as a problem of an educational character, even though it forces us to realize how much more

important the informal and adult phases of our educational effort necessarily become in this instance as over against the strictly formal and preparatory stages of our education. It is not too utopian, however, to assume that as we correct the deficiencies of the social education aspects of formal education there will remain much less to be done (and undone) by informal adult educative effort. In this we confront perhaps the gravest aspect of the racial situation: the emergency character of the present-day situation, with its crucial and critical urgencies.

Somewhat encouraging, therefore, are the facts reported on all the fronts of attack on the racial problem of greatly increased concern and activity, with some healthy and welcome tendencies toward a re-examination of program and traditional techniques even by conservative organizations operating in the interracial field. In fact this realignment of policies and programs may be put down as probably the most basic of the current trends, the more outstanding or significant of which I shall now try to enumerate:

1. The increasing gravity of racial issues and tensions in these years of war crisis has undoubtedly called forth greatly increased effort and fresh organizational attack on the problem. The pressure of new organizations and programs has correspondingly provoked renewed activity and in a considerable number of cases re-examinations of program on the part of the

older organizations in the interracial field.

2. Even though there still continues the old traditional partisanship over formal "solutions" of the race problem, progressively the various organizational programs are tending, even under face-saving cover of reiterated generalizations, to become more and more specialized and concrete. By implication, at least, these organizations are being forced to abandon their old monopolistic approaches, accepting a cooperative relationship toward other organizations and their respective programs. Joint endorsements of certain campaigns and multiple membership, not to mention an increase of interlocking committee membership, are significantly to be noted.

3. Though the demarcation between "Northern" and "Southern" schools of racial thought and program still persists, it is tending toward a levelling-off situation of general national concern over the issue as a "national problem." Witness the rapid recent growth of NAACP and CIO activity in the South and the equally rapid extension of the Interracial Committee pattern to the East, Midwest and Far West.

4. The base of racial movements seems to be shifting, likewise, not only to the greater participation of Negroes in policy and executive control, and not only toward much greater participation of Negroes in the rank and file membership and financial support of these organizations (with exceptions, of course)—but there is also a significant shift, particularly with the younger organizations, toward mass membership and a far greater inclu-

sion of the more ordinary, "lower-class" folk.

5. Significant as is the above trend, even in movements still overtly racialistic in drive and appeal, there is a still more significant trend toward the integration of the Negro phases of the social situation with general reformist organizations and programs. The CIO program, the *Southern Tenant Farmers Association*, the *Council Against Intolerance in America*, the various Intercultural Councils may be mentioned as samples of this. One of the most novel and auspicious developments in the entire situation is this relatively recent trend toward *the common cause approach* and the integration of the Negro interests as a part of a general situation; in short, a tendency to break through the traditional racial isolationism to a more objective and scientific view of the Negro's status as a condition that is only secondarily racial.

Concurrent with these trends are certain corollaries which flow quite inevitably from them. We may mention three: first, the gradual obsolescence of the paternalistic and traditionally philanthropic approaches; second, marked increase in the participation of Negro leadership and in critical protest on the part of Negro public opinion, and third, the beginning, at least, of cooperative action on the part of a growing number of interracial organizations as directed pressure groups. In both the political and the labor fields there has been considerable increase in lobbying and emphasis on mass action types of campaign for various objectives.

Thus, it would seem, in a cycle normal for most social problems and

causes, the American race problem is running a typical course from philanthropic, paternalistic approaches and techniques of amelioration to reformist liberal sponsorship, and then after passing through an acute protest stage of minority self-assertation with its accompanying chauvinism, to broaden out finally into integrated mass movements of general social reconstruction and reform. In ignorance of this normal course of affairs, many today miss the widening significance of the Negro cause and misinterpret its acute prominence in many general issues. Really, in fact, in becoming either the "test-case" or the "complicating factor," the minority cause becomes crucial in the life of the majority as involving a point beyond which evasion, temporizing and compromise can go no further, and so, the general issue has to be faced "up or down."

By all the signs, and with accumulative force from all these separate analyses, America is shown reaching or to have reached just such a point on what can still be phrased as the question of race relations and interracial justice and unity, but what more properly and profoundly should be viewed as the practical problem of working out a more consistent political, economic and social democracy for the people at large.

Several of our authors hint at such conclusions, and doubtless would have been more explicit but for their major concentration on the reportorial job of detailing what was actually happening on the racial front with the church agencies, the interracial committees, unions and labor organizations, philanthropic agencies and foundations, Negro advancement or-

ganizations, the press, the various Federal agencies, the armed services and the schools. On these specific reports it is also not necessary to repeat in detail. Much of the point would be lost in summarization, especially the conviction that any intelligent reader should deduce from such accumulative evidence that it is unwise, yes, unsafe to over-generalize on these matters either about white or Negro opinion or with regard to mixed or Negro group action.

There is also exhibited the usual and to be expected divergence of opinion and program emphasis, but happily with an increasingly necessary and effective division of labor in implementing these programs and efforts. Yet one fact, one generalization, if you will, must be made and granted;—it is that amazing growth of over-all minority solidarity which has come into Negro life over and above and in spite of the many minority partisanships and their factionalisms. Leaders and organizations with vested interests in their own tight formulae are beginning to feel this pressure and realize that they must yield to some new strategy of cooperative action. There is a parallel awakening on the part of white organizations and groups as to the need for immediate consideration and action on racial reforms, due largely, as is also in part the Negro solidarity, to the racial repercussions of the war crisis. On the other hand, we have just as marked the intensification of the opposition camps, who seem to sense the growing pressures for reform and the accruing momentum of considerable recent improvement in the Negro's status and treatment as a signal for a "last-ditch"

stand against throughgoing democratic equality. Out of such a triangle of forces comes both the danger and the promise of the current racial situation, and all our authors make us vividly aware that we have come to a crisis, where action and action alone can convince and count.

In the field of organized religion the discrepancies between democratic professions and democratic practise on race are not only most glaring but most ironically self-contradictory. Miss McCulloch, our reporter for this field, frankly acknowledges despair that so great a moral force as the Christian church is not marshalled positively on this vital issue, and clearly sees that religion may relegate itself to the side-lines of modern society unless in such matters it assumes its moral responsibilities. She also stresses, rightly, the "self-defeating anomaly, the ironic spectacle of representatives of the churches rebuking secular organizations for practising the same unChristian discriminations which not only prevail commonly in the Christian churches but which these very same leaders sometimes fear to denounce in their home churches." Yet out of the present-day exposures of such self-contradictions has come a marked demand for reform. In different degrees but all with some accelerated pace the various Protestant Churches and the Catholic Church have responded, it would seem. The Catholic Church, in addition to having instituted a new interracial council movement, has recently opened up many of its schools to Negro students. As to the democratic practise of human equality, however, the Christian church is still far from

activating its own basic formula of the "brotherhood of man," and accordingly cannot claim either moral or actual leadership in the sphere of race relations.

After a succinct history of the Interracial Commission movement, an account has been given the reader of the recent extension of the machinery of the municipal or state interracial council or committee to other than Southern regions and situations. In fact in this there has been some much-needed extension of program and some slight revision of philosophy of approach, although Dr. Clement seems not to recognize fully the differences between the traditional and some of the more modern bases for this work. He does note the tendency to go beyond mere palliative appeasement and sporadically preventive measures to newer techniques of persuading the various communities as to their moral and practical responsibilities and the importance of planned programs of reconstruction and reform. By very reason of the extension of this machinery to centers like New York, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, let us hope it will become a new movement with new techniques and a new philosophy of operation. To the extent that the movement becomes objective and realistic, it must needs become intercultural, and transform itself into committees for amity and unity, with respect to all religious, and national as well as racial minorities.

Undoubtedly the proud assertion of one of the writers on the interracial labor front that "we are further advanced than organized religion" is true, and the unfavorable contrast could be duplicated for the interracial

commissions, by and large, for the schools and for the Federal government. For organized labor, after a selfish exclusionist policy still perpetuated by many craft unions, has been forced to a realistic realization of the common handicaps of discrimination and the common group advantages of solidarity against discriminatory conditions. Most particularly the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the National Maritime Union have not only seen but vindicated this broad position. With a primary aim of "bringing about the effective organization of the working men and women of America for common benefits regardless of race, color, creed or cultural nationality," they have sensed the vital connection of racial discrimination with their ultimate common objective. Some of the more progressive units among them have seen, further, the need for adult worker education along these lines and have thus opened up a new and important channel of favorable and effective public opinion on interracial justice and cooperation. Special mention (and credit) is to be given at this point to the constructive contribution of the Fair Employment Practice Committee, whose procedures and accomplishments are adequately detailed in Mr. Davis's article. The FEPC finds it must operate *both* with the employer and the employee to implement effectively the enlargement of industrial opportunity for Negroes, particularly in the matter of seniority rights, up-grading and apprenticeship training. But the encouraging facts to be noticed are not so much the present precarious gains or the present remaining obstacles, but the significant opening up of the labor

situation as one of the major fronts of interracial relations. This development of the war years and the years of economic stress which immediately preceded them is perhaps the most outstanding single advance of our generation in race relations. It may well prove pivotal for the present phase of this development.

With foundations and philanthropic agencies we naturally revert to one of the oldest and most conservative fronts of the racial situation. Mr. Brownlee is right, however, in calling out a wide historical perspective to show that, prior to the period of sponsorship by industrialists, the church agency approach to Negro education was uncompromising and liberal. Yet it is apparent to even lay observers that in common with the corporate foundations, the church foundations are today largely time-serving, conservative and rarely crusading. This is, of course, not to minimize their past or present contributions to the enlargement of racial education and opportunity. Dr. Brownlee's informative review of the activities and projects of the Peabody, the Slater, the Jeanes, the American Missionary Association, the General Education Board, the Phelps-Stokes and Rosenwald Funds, the Carnegie Corporation, the Harmon Foundation, the Field Foundation and others is factually very impressive. But he would agree, I am sure, that the practical strategy of a tacit alliance in many cases with the undemocratic principle of segregation has confronted the foundations and other agencies with an increasingly embarrassing and handicapping dilemma. Their present problem is how to divorce their pro-

grams from his unholy alliance and form new ones involving more liberally democratic and progressive programs and interests. They only lately seem to have come to any actual realization that their major problem is how to help bridge the great divide of educational segregation rather than merely to enlarge educational facilities and opportunities. A few progressive executives in their field are at last aware of this, and are taking some steps and initiating some new programs with such objectives in mind if not in view. They fortunately can find some common cause projects and organizations to help finance, which should be regarded as effective auxiliary contributions to Negro welfare.

Negro advancement organizations, very much on the increase in number and in base of support, have naturally varied programs and philosophies of race relations. They are only recently acquiring a sense of common cause and have yet to develop beyond an initial experimental stage any proper division of labor and any effective clearing-house over-all coordination. But since my assignment transcends the purely factual, it is incumbent on me to call attention to several signs pointing in this direction. Several times during the war crisis Negro organizations have met in informal caucuses of their group representatives, and have been agreeably surprised at their common agreement and underlying solidarity. If democratically administered, the newly organized American Council on Race Relations (definitely organized, May 8th, 1944 at Chicago) may do an even wider service of coordinating in loose clearing-house fashion all the main organiza-

tional efforts and programs with a definite bearing on the racial situation. For a considerable while, however, there will remain a special field and need for the "Negro Advancement" type of organization which of course, often entails mixed racial membership, but makes the special appeal and serves the special needs of direct racial representation.

As with the labor front, it is with the press and other agencies like the radio and the movie that we come to another relatively new frontier of action and influence. The separate Negro press has been generally regarded as just the modern extension of an old and historically effective institution of race propaganda and defense. But the present-day trends of significance in Negro journalism have to do with a really new conception of the rôle of the press in the service of a minority cause, *viz.*, the implementing and education of minority group opinion and action. Here, the danger is obviously chauvinism, and at times the Negro press does not successfully skirt this ever-present temptation. However, especially in terms of the war issues and their inevitable broadening of the perspectives even of the local domestic issues of racial discrimination, there has lately come into Negro journalism pretty widely a deepening of insight and a great widening of approach. To carry this progress a stage further into constructive programs of mass education and the proper integration of ordinary Negro public opinion with the political, economic and social issues of contemporary society is the great new job ahead in Negro journalism. On this score, the Negro minority has an analogous

problem with that of the foundations and other benefactor programs, how to think, talk and act so that every move creates a lessening rather than a deepening of the great interracial divide.

Happily liberal journalism, and even some precedent-breaking moves in old-line journalism have carried the general press many steps further in very recent years on the race question. To the special crusading stands of journals like *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The Survey*, *PM*, must be added the significant new shifts of news and editorial policy on the part of widely circulated papers like *Life*, *Time*, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Sun*, the *Richmond Post-Dispatch*, the *Atlanta Constitution* to mention a few outstanding examples. The radio chains, as well as a few more progressive local stations have begun to register progressive change, though too slowly for the crucial character of race relations at the present moment, and so, too, but even more slowly, has that important agency of indirect public opinion making—the movies. All these need to move simultaneously in the direction of more representative and forthright advocacy of full democracy for the Negro and the proper proportional representation of his minority life in their respective media. They, more than any other single set of agencies, have the most effective single antidote for prejudice,—a fair and constructively informed public opinion.

Factually, or even critically there is very little to add to Mr. Alfred Smith's competent and provocative article on race relations and the Fed-

eral government. It maintains an objective balance factually as between political and governmental gains and setbacks, and critically as between praise and blame for official practices and policy. One can well agree with the conclusion that the present trend toward integration of the Negro Federal worker is a net gain despite the loss of the special dispensation of the Negro "advisers" and their special channels of corrective appeal and review. On this point, however, Mr. Smith merely presents the paradox of a continuing need for some particular corrective steering of governmental policy with reference to the Negro minority in civil and legal rights and in public employment. This obvious need for fairer executive and legislative treatment can probably be met by increased emphasis on constitutional guarantees and so implemented, any special enforcement acts or procedures would escape the onus and criticism of special legislation on particular paternalism. Certainly few, even among the special students of the race question, expected to see the political and legal front of race relations as acute or crucial as it is at present, with questions like the poll-tax, the closed "white primary" and the court protests against legalized discrimination and segregation occupying the front-line of national and local contention.

As to the government's relation to the race situation, it is common-place knowledge and admission that, in spite of much progress made, particularly through more liberal inclusion of the Negro in the various "New Deal" social programs, the net effect of the Federal government in the race

situation has been far off democratic par. This has been increased in the unfavorable direction by the continuance of racial segregation in the armed forces as a basic general principle of their organization. Corrective reversals alone can restore general moral authority to the Federal government, which on this score is in the same dilemma as the churches, being called upon to ask others to act on a better basis than its own general practise. This, with the rising obstructionist power and tactics of the Southern race reactionaries, has reduced the governmental and the political situation to a dangerous crisis. For obviously the racial strains and stresses of war reconstruction will be even greater than those of the present, and they must be worked out without due benefit of democratic precedents,—the major war programs having so defaulted on the right democratic procedures. The only way around such an impasse would seem to be the clear-headed and courageous inclusion of the major issues of the Negro minority situation in a general program of objectively democratic social reform and reconstruction, obviating, on the one hand, any need for special legislation, and on the other, any openly racial conflict situation.

Oddly enough, despite the general educational emphasis of the whole section, the particular section on the race relations programs of the schools is not wholly adequate. Theoretically it makes a strong point of the incompatibility of racial segregation as a principle of organization with a system of democratic schools, and points out also the general need, which educators are beginning to recognize, for

soundly interracial social education as an integral part of public school education. However, not sufficient attention has been called to specific and promising plans for offsetting these deficiencies such as the Springfield Plan, the new Chicago school curriculum units in Negro and other minority backgrounds, to mention but two out of many. Certainly such agencies as *The Progressive Education Association*, *The Bureau for Intercultural Education*, the various educational commissions and groups now working on social education programs are evidence of considerable concern and effort on the part of educators to meet the racial issue realistically on their own grounds. Much of this material will be coming into the general curriculum for the first time, particularly that important part of it based on anthropology and the comparative history of cultures and peoples, but it does promise to implement intellectually the right democratic social and cultural perspectives.

Very properly these materials involve just as much the creation of the right sort of international-mindedness as well as the right sort of interracial-mindedness. Here, again, we have a case of an enlarging and profitably reinforcing integration of the racial interests with larger and even more important issues. If we can ever generally establish through education the implemented belief that "no one nation and no one race can and shall dominate the earth," we will have broken the intellectual backbone of prejudice and certainly, so far as education is concerned, will have laid an intellectual foundation for effective democracy. But it will be even more

difficult to democratize the public school as an institution than to democratize the curriculum. No one doubts the difficulty but few nowadays openly oppose the objective. The educational front could and may become one of the strategic active fronts of democratic racial re-adjustment; for the moment, however, it shows only signs of sensitive self-examination and tentative experimental groping for new techniques and new emphases.

All, therefore, that can be reliably predicted about the near future of race relations in America is a "thumbs-down" forecast for the *status quo*. The war and the rising urgencies of both the domestic and the international situation have brought the *status quo* in race relations to the brink of a heavy, risky disequilibrium. The present-day contradictions, bolstered by compromise and facaded with hypocritical conventionalities, cannot last much longer. Race relations, in short, can get much worse or much better; but are unlikely to remain as they were, or even as they are in the unstable advances of war concessions. Some think they must get much worse to get better; that is, that only in the crucible of considerable strife and struggle can they be basically reformed. Personally I would be among

such gloomy prophets of historical precedents, were it not for the rather exceptional factors of war reconstruction which will demand radically new and untried techniques of planned reorganization for society at large. If both the luck and the strategy of race relations can swing racial issues into this mainstream of social progress, there are hopes for radical but not disastrously costly readjustment. All competent observers seem to agree on the present urgency of the situation, on the fundamental course to which American society is morally committed, and on the likelihood of the race question's becoming one of the crucial general issues in our national life. Beyond that the authorities, like the doctors, disagree considerably both in diagnosis and prognosis of solution, with an increasing number of intellectuals, however, on the side of the optimists and mentally prepared, at least, to meet the issue head-on and not so much for the sake of the Negro as for the sake of democracy itself. And among them, with horizons widened beyond selfish or narrow racialism, are many intelligent, sober but militant and morally aroused Negroes, who see no sanity or safety in half-way solutions.