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# Physical Anthropology and the Negro in the Present Crisis\*

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## INTRODUCTION

THE John A. Andrew Clinical Society is one of the oldest and finest products of the inspired efforts and visions of Negro medical leaders who many years ago laid the foundation for means by which their professional colleagues might always keep pace with medical progress in practice and in ethic. The worth of this organization to the profession and the esteem in which it is held are clearly evident in the quality and length of its service and in the widespread localities from which the large attendance at its meetings is attracted. I desire first to express my appreciation of the privilege of participating in the program of this twenty-fourth annual meeting of the Society.

I wish also to pay personal tribute to the Secretary-Treasurer of the Society, Dr. John Andrew Kenney, for the long and distinguished service he has rendered his colleagues and his people. Through the caliber and duration of his pioneer efforts under difficult circumstances as medical historian, editor, surgeon, organizer and administrator, Dr. Kenney has greatly advanced the cause of his professional group and given inspiration to large numbers of the younger physicians who must now share the tasks to which he has devoted himself. His place in the history of the Negro in medicine is well assured of permanence.

The broad scope and pervasive significance of the subject with which this discussion deals, compels finally, reflective salute to the foresight and achievement of the founder of Tuskegee, Booker Taliaferro Washington, who attacked the problem of the status of the Negro in his day with such intelligence, conviction and determination that the good he wrought will survive him many generations. Washington himself doubtless never felt

that he had the whole truth in respect to the solution of the problems of his people. Certainly the principles and execution of his program have never wanted for critical challenge in his own day or since. Yet the clear recognition of the effectiveness and usefulness of his efforts has never detracted from the value of the work of equally sincere and able leaders who made other approaches to the same problem.

So today, the complexity and multilateral nature of the problem of the Negro's status in America has made it generally apparent that equitable solution can result only from contributions from many diverse sources. It is my purpose here to emphasize certain promising opportunities for significant contributions to the problem which might result from a concerted and well coordinated effort to bring to bear upon it, the knowledge of the field of physical anthropology. This approach has been almost wholly neglected, yet it is most timely and teems with constructive possibilities.

## BRIEF

The basis for racial prejudice between different groups varies. In the United States, prejudice against the Jew has origins significantly different from those of prejudice against the Negro. There are common factors in the attitudes of dominant groups toward minorities and there are specific elements which apply only to each particular case. Remedies for the evils resultant from racial prejudice must apply both to the general and the specific factors.

The specific factor has especial importance in respect to the attitude of the dominant white toward the Negro in America. Here the factor is the belief that the Negro is the biological inferior of the white.

It is our present thesis that the materials are at hand and that the time is ripe for effective

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attack upon this special attitude in the general population. Suitable materials have never been more amply ready nor circumstances more opportune.

#### ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE PAST

Human society has always needed a comprehensive and accurate anthropology or science of man. Yet the growth of the science has been so slow that attempts at political applications of physical anthropology have generally proved premature and when pushed too enthusiastically have tended to bring the science into disrepute. Consequently many reforms which should have been based upon findings of anthropology have had other origins.

It would have been logically expected that the doctrines of the equality of man before God and the human injustice of slavery would have stemmed from facts provided by anthropology. Yet it was the religious leader, Jesus of Nazareth, who was most responsible for the point of view upon which our modern democracy rests, that men are created equal, and it was the novelist, Harriet Beecher Stowe, who furnished the most significant single agent responsible for moulding American public opinion against the institution of Negro slavery. In criticizing the poor ethnology shown by the statesmen in the treaty of Versailles, the late eminent English biometrist, Karl Pearson, questioned whether there could even have been a war, had the sciences of Man himself been as fully developed as the physical sciences.

Many vital developments in physical anthropology are of such recent date that as late as the nineteenth century scientific information on the biologic status of different people which could have been most constructively employed in the controversies over slavery, was not available. Nevertheless, there was much pseudo-scientific allegation supplied in response to demand during this time, the general import of which was, that the Negro was a lower order of creature than a man and therefore not entitled to the protection of the Almighty or of human law.

Because the populations of the time were particularly receptive to statements of this kind, their essence was so absorbed into European and American cultures that it forms the unconscious basis

for much of the group and individual attitudes and beliefs of the white today.

#### MAN AS THE ANTHROPOLOGIST SEES HIM

In 1942 we have a fairly satisfactory concept of Man's place in the universe. He is the dominant form of life on one of the minor planets of a star called the Sun. This planet, the Earth, is about two billion years old. Life has probably been existent upon it for about one billion years. The first forms of life were unicellular marine organisms from which there gradually evolved more and more complex forms, each with some improvements over its predecessors in adaptations for survival.

About half a billion years ago a basic anatomical patent called the vertebral column appeared. This development was a very useful one because its possessors have been more successful than other forms of life. One of the most recent of the vertebrates is the creature called Man, who has become the dominant form of earth life. His peculiar success has been due to his habitually erect posture, which has freed his hands for all manner of skills and mischief and so helped stimulate the great development of his brain, which has unparalleled capacity for utilizing previous experience to its owner's advantage.

We know many facts about Man's genealogical tree and of his relationships with other surviving members of the order Primates. Modern Man is himself about one million years old. His brain had attained at least 95,000 years ago, the size and form it has today. It was not until about the last 8,000 years, however, that Man learned to use his brain and hands to develop what are called civilizations. The greatest period of Man's existence as a species has been spent as a wild, slow-learning creature who very gradually learned to make tools and weapons of stone and later of metals.

We now know also, much of the relative importance of heredity and nurture in determining what the growing human being becomes as an adult, and we are possessed of an amazing mass and variety of details about the mechanisms of these phenomena.

We are familiar, moreover, with the biological

factors responsible for the growth, decline and vigor of populations, and have an extraordinarily intimate acquaintance with the structure and operation of the human body and the disturbances to which it is subject.

We have a considerable understanding of variation in Man. We recognize that human beings differ from each other principally in respect to the variants of age, sex, constitutional habitus and race, and we are aware that the variant race is biologically the least significant of the three.

Despite the vast and thrilling perspective which this knowledge affords, Man's ever present inhumanity to his fellows and his failure to develop a balanced economy show that he has not yet brought this information to bear upon his social problems. Modern Man's 8,000 years of civilization rest much like a veneer upon the behavior patterns conditioned by nearly a million years of prehistoric existence as a rather wild though anatomically advanced primate.

#### RECENT NATURE OF BASIC DISCOVERIES

The immense wealth of facts upon which the outlook just scanned rests, is essentially a product of the last century, an origin too recent for the knowledge to have been of great value in aiding past social reforms. Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1834 and in the United States in 1863. A mature physical anthropology could have aided greatly in bringing about both of these advances, but the science was not then sufficiently developed to have been of much help, although the period was one of vital activity in anthropology and related fields.

The foundations of many fundamental modern concepts in human biology were at that time just being laid and were generally the subject of much controversy and disagreement. Let us take for example such subjects as the antiquity of man, the fact and pathways of organic evolution, the role of the cell in health and disease, the mechanisms of heredity, and the effects of the endocrine glands on physique and personality.

Boucher de Perthes was severely ridiculed when he first published in 1846 the descriptions of his discoveries of prehistoric flints and his beliefs in their indication of the great antiquity of man.

People then still tended to accept the biblical story of creation. It was absurd, they said, to suggest that such stones as de Perthes had found had been modelled by human hand, and even worse, to imply an age for them that was older than the world itself. But the discovery of Neanderthal man in 1857 and the numerous fossil finds subsequently made, together with great improvements in geological time standards, have firmly established the great extent of human antiquity.

It was not until 1859 that Darwin's world-shaking, "Origin of Species," appeared and "The Descent of Man," did not follow until 1871. The labors of the paleontologists and anatomists in constructing mammalian and human phyletic trees, stimulated by this epochal work, have continued to the present day.

Virchow announced only in 1856, his theory of cellular pathology, which clearly foreshadowed all current research in cytology and histology of both the normal and abnormal.

Although Mendel published in 1865 his classic findings on heredity, they did not influence the scientific world until their rediscovery in 1900, and resultant modern genetics is practically a development of the last three decades.

Constitutional type has been a perennial subject of interest to man, but in the seventies and eighties Sir William Gull was first definitely associating a characteristic group of changes in the body and mind with deficiency of the thyroid gland and Brown-Sequard was conducting upon himself his famous pioneer experiments with gonadal extracts.

Numerous additional instances of very recent origin of basic discoveries in fields of biological science applicable to anthropology could be furnished. The examples cited suffice to show that the basis for much of the axiomatic fundamentals in modern anthropological thinking was, so late as a century ago, either undiscovered or controversial and unaccepted.

#### FALLACIOUS DOCTRINES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The lack of an adequate anthropology did not, however, prevent the propounding of speculative

racial doctrines or the popular absorption from valid scientific studies, of part truths which fitted the spirit of the times. Britain and other European powers were undergoing colonial expansion. In 1853, the year after "Uncle Tom's Cabin" appeared in America, the Count de Gobineau published his now thoroughly discredited but then well received "Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines." The "survival of the fittest" concept was so overplayed that it grew to mean "might makes right" in the popular mind, with great injustice to Darwin. Weismann in 1889 advocated his theory of the continuity of the germ plasm with its obvious implications of the importance of heredity over environment.

All this was good reading for successful imperialists. To them, people who were subjugated, or who had not developed great civilizations and empires could not have been otherwise. Minorities had no hope or help from such teachings of science. Mendel's work when it became known could only further entrench beliefs of this kind. No scientific studies were in progress in America at this time which would offset these trends of thought.

#### FOCUS OF EARLY AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGY

It is a curious thing that physical anthropology in America has concentrated its attention on the Indian and done relatively little on the Negro although the Negro has been an increasing population element, of much greater social importance, and the Indian, until recently, a declining one.

Historically, the two races, Indian and Negro, would seem to have presented to the early investigators problems of comparable biological interest. The Indian before Columbus was totally unknown to the European, and in the biological sphere, his physical types, their variation, his origins and relationships to other groups of mankind presented very absorbing problems. This was in addition to the fascinating array of varieties of cultural status the Indian groups showed.

The Negro, on the other hand, was a transplant, dissociated completely by circumstances from his native environment. He could bring with him only the contents of his mind. While Herskovits' "The Myth of the Negro Past" would indicate that these

contents were adequate for many African survivals of today, it is to be remembered that this finding is of the present moment. The scientific study of capacity for adjustment to new environment, of biological differences which made the Negro more amenable than the Indian to the purposes for which he was imported, of the easily documentable phenomena of racial mixture, of care for the health of the indentured, all these failed to receive the attention of the early workers in anthropology.

The official government anthropological agency, the Bureau of American Ethnology, although devoted to the cultural phases, has confined itself nearly entirely to the study of the American Indian. Hooton has suggested in his "Apes, Men and Morons," that federal anthropologists would have encountered political complications if they had studied the Negro and reported findings which indicated changes in social practice contrary to the current mores.

There seems no reason to doubt that though scientists have never failed to perceive the opportunities offered by biological studies of the Negro, until very recent years the possibility of non scientific complications as well as technical difficulties have inhibited high grade objective investigation. So the public has had to be content with only too well fancied stereotypes. There has been ample work to be done on the Indian and it has been safer and more convenient for the anthropologist to concentrate on him rather than on the Negro.

Nevertheless the past two decades or so have witnessed the accumulation of many investigations which afford much more objective bases for appraisal of the Negro, and what is even more important, help point the way to the kind of thinking, and the kind of measures which are necessary to secure the social reforms essential to the welfare and security of our nation.

#### FUNDAMENTALS OF APPROACH

Modern astronomy has emphasized the cosmic insignificance of man; geology has shown his newness as a form of life; paleontology, in its demonstrations of the rise and decline of phyla, indicates no reason why man should go on forever; indeed, comparative anatomy suggests that in cer-

tain features such as giant size, man already shows signs of approaching decline; relativity throws into ultra-microscopic relief the length of the human life span. Knowledge from many fields has made it clear that the resources of the world in time and materials are more than adequate to support the potential population of the earth in abundance of necessities for time calculable in thousands of years. It would seem futile to waste the brief human span in egomaniacal extravagances at the expense of higher values attainable. In all of this science has but implemented with detail the religious perceptions of the Psalmist.

"When I consider thy heavens, the works of thy fingers; the moon and the stars, which thou has ordained; what is man that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man that thou visitest him?"

"For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.

"As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it and it is gone and the place thereof shall know it no more.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

"So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

"(For) the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him and his righteousness unto children's children."\*

We have in the parallels presented an integration of science with religion. This consistency of modern fact with entrenched religious outlook makes it possible to use the common spiritual consciousness as the fundamental to which all present considerations must appeal. Where this perspective of proportion and fairness does not exist, it must be cultivated if we are to survive as a democracy.

#### RACE AND THE FUTURE

The circumstances which in the past gave rise to modern races may not be expected to recur. The globe encircling nature of the current war is enforcing cultural contacts of unprecedented variety and degree along with an amount of blood admixture which cannot be estimated at present. Stark necessity is making for a universal brotherhood of man, which cannot be dissolved by the return of

troops and exiles to their homelands. As Boas so well shows in his "The Mind of Primitive Man," no particular variety of mankind has been the elect of Nature in developing those things which are considered the highest attributes of civilization, and as Hooton has repeatedly indicated, all existing human groups can with profit to themselves and humanity purge themselves of biologically undesirable elements. Scientific realities provide no place for racial chauvinism in the future.

#### THE NEGRO'S JOB

The Negro would appear to have his share of the biological assets essential to becoming a full fledged contributor to the new and world-wide reconstruction which must follow a United Nations victory.

His merits have all emerged through difficulties and against keen competition. Most conspicuous have been physical excellences, objectively apparent in the success of amateur and professional athletes. All athletic performance has an anatomical and physiological basis. This has not been satisfactorily elucidated for most fields, although newer physiological techniques particularly, have made possible much progress in this direction, and more will come. None of the anatomical and physiological factors so far identified as contributing to athletic success has been found peculiar to any racial group, and it is not likely that any will be. However, the American Negro hybrid appears to harbor in his constitution enough of these factors to enable him to produce a surprising number of champions in those fields in which he has been able to compete without restriction.

A physical hardihood has been apparent also in the success with which the rigors of the involuntary indenture, the emancipation and urbanization have been withstood. The Negro up to this point has passed his survival tests with honors.

In the mental sphere, both general abilities and special talent have been sufficiently evident to indicate that there is no lack of individuals in the group with capacity to excel in all forms of intellectual endeavor.

The Negro has the right to expect of his country only equal opportunity to develop his capacities. Where opportunity exists, the responsibility is his

\* Psalms 8-3 4; 90-4; 103-15, 16; 23-1, 2, 3; 90-12; 103-17.

own for his development and for assuming due share of community burdens. No brief need be made for any man who has had a fair chance and not used it.

While the Negro has done very well with what he has had, as has been so adequately stressed, it is also true that he addresses a two front war in the necessity of striving for opportunity, on the one hand, and of assuming full community responsibilities, on the other. He must, therefore, vigorously and indefatigably educate and indoctrinate both without and within, and he cannot afford to concentrate on one front to the neglect of the other. This will become more and more obvious with the passage of time.

#### OBSTACLES

Progressive idealism always encounters rough going. The Gilbert and Sullivan operas poignantly satirize the paradoxes and weaknesses of the British caste system, but their popularity has never made them effective agents of reform. The penetrating criticism of George Bernard Shaw has resulted in greater benefit to him than to the social order at whose flaws it was directed. The highly inspirational and competent efforts of H. G. Wells in his "Outline of History" and of Wells and Huxley in their "Science of Life" have not made the impression on our educational system which their logic and merit and subsequent historical developments would justify.

There is no reason to believe that efforts to induce the American public to regard objectively the biological qualities of the groups in its heterogeneous population will find readier reception in 1942 than before. There is every reason why such efforts should be prosecuted today with the utmost vigor.

#### SOURCES AND METHODS

If one ask how biological knowledge may best be brought to bear upon entrenched racial prejudice, the answer might be phrased, "*work, sweat and tears,*" for many individuals must educate themselves on the matter, be able to convince others and be prepared to continue against the most unyielding resistance.

Self education on the biologic aspects of race is an important present necessity because adequate

presentation of this vital subject has not been integrated into our educational systems. Moreover, the seeker after enlightenment must consult many sources.

The Christian has the Bible and the Mohamadan the Koran, but there is yet no single authority which will provide catechismic answers for all the problems presented in attempts at applied anthropology. General background may be acquired through such books as Linton's, "The Study of Man," and Boas', "The Mind of Primitive Man" and "Anthropology and Modern Life." This perspective may be enlarged with factual detail simply presented, on comparative anatomy, fossil men and modern races, through such a work as Hooton's, "Up from the Ape." Klineberg's, "Race Differences," is a very readable summary of facts on physical, mental and cultural aspects. The 1934 yearbook number of the Journal of Negro Education and Lewis', "The Biology of the Negro," furnish valuable reviews of existing data on the normal constitution and pathological peculiarities of the Negro, respectively. In a recent appraisal of the status and desiderata of "The Physical Anthropology of the American Negro,"\* the writer has indicated possibilities for future studies and means of public education. Clearly, acquiring an adequate grasp of the information requires considerable time and effort, but it would seem an expenditure which a number of members of the medical, teaching and journalistic professions would be willing to make, given a program and responsible leadership.

At Howard University during the past ten years the writer has attempted to make a contribution in this direction through the beginnings of a laboratory of anatomy and physical anthropology, the founding of a society for promotion of the subject and a series of publications dealing with all aspects of the problem addressed to both scientific and lay audiences.†

While these items constitute a start on what appears to be the best rational approach to the current problem, in this field as in others, the national emergency has rendered the "speed-up" necessary.

\* *Am. J. Phys. Anthropol.*, 29: 113-223. 1942.

† For list see op. cit.

## THE MILITARY URGENCY

It is the job of the military services to put the best possible set of fighting men in the field with the strongest possible morale, just as it is the job of a football coach to put the best eleven men he can assemble on the gridiron with the greatest determination to win.

Where football teams are determined by playing ability alone, one may find athletes representing almost any combination of race and nationality playing together efficiently in the same line-up. Where race bars certain athletes, as in big league professional football and major league baseball, the games cannot attain the standard of excellence possible if the best athletes obtainable were competing. So in the armed forces, the strength of the whole is weakened if the members of the numerous specialized branches are chosen on any other basis than their ability in the several lines.

It is an undeniable fact, from a biological point of view, that the racial segregation of extant military policy in depriving many Negroes of the privilege of fighting in units for which their ability would qualify them on a competitive basis, to this extent reduces the potential strength of the nation's defense.

At the same time, it is to be recognized that the military policies of segregation are not entirely based upon tradition and prejudice. There are, of course, Negroes and whites who might not immediately adapt to associations to which they were unaccustomed and for this reason retard the teamwork so essential to effectiveness in combat. Further, the contention is beyond dispute that the armed forces are not sociological reform schools and that their job is the practical one of making the best fighting teams possible out of their material.

However, the whole military training is an educative process in which emphasis is principally upon values which differ markedly for the most part from those of civil life. There would seem to

be, therefore, no reason why a recruit should not be thoroughly inculcated with the concept that the racial identity of his fellows and officers is unimportant, since ability in the task at hand is what counts most for "success in battle, the ultimate object of all military training." The adjustment necessary for this attitude is not of different order from that successfully made by all classes of men for other phases of military life and values. What works on the gridiron should work on the battlefield.

## THE PRESENT NEED

Today the critical nature of the racial situation in the national emergency requires efforts for more rapid progress toward just solution than could accrue from long term programs such as described for our own laboratory in the biological sphere and such as have been in effect in other lines under various auspices.

Negroes should look particularly to themselves for initiative and action in this matter. For effective results it will be necessary first for the largest possible number of people to become broadly informed on racial biology. This is hard, tedious intellectual work, unattended by excitement or other gratifications. This information and its import must be implanted in the minds of Government determiners of policy, on the one hand, for the purpose of effecting change, and among Negroes of all groups, on the other, to stimulate the will to achieve wherever opportunity is presented and eliminate a number of faults to which they do not give sufficient attention.

The writer is amply familiar with the views of those who contend that nothing can be done by procedure of this kind, but the record of the twentieth century is quite against the negator who says, "It can't be done." Surely the good possible from incorporation of the significance of anthropological fact into the thinking of leaders of all categories today is an objective worthy of any effort. Our own hand is to the plow.