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Segregation*

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SEGREGATION

KELLY MILLER

RESIDENTIAL segregation is the acute phase of the negro problem at the present time. Our large cities are being dotted with black wards and white wards, which the politician knows as well as the seaman knows the depths and shallows of the sea. Public discussion of the race problem for the past decade has been all but exclusively concerned with the Northern migration and the issues leading up to and flowing from that movement. The rapid shifting of the negro population from the agricultural regions to the industrial centres was but an incident of the World War, which has been prolonged by the restrictive policy adopted affecting foreign immigration. The immediate motive of the movement must clearly be attributed to industrial attractiveness and economic allurements. It became seriously complicated by agitation for political rights and civic equality. At one time this movement threatened to assume the proportion of a hysterical hegira shifting the gravamen of the race problem from the South to the North. But after meeting the sudden necessity of war expansion, Northern industries have resumed their normal rate, making a steady but diminished demand for the reinforcement of black labor. We may therefore calculate that the growth of the negro contingent in the Northern cities will be continuous and controlled by the law of supply and demand in the labor market.

The negro leaves the agricultural district and the small town and proceeds to the large cities of the North, where practically the whole Northern contingent is to be found. Because of the rapid expansion of numbers, the negro problem has become more instant and urgent in the North than

in the South. The question of housing is the first issue to intrude itself and compel attention. Other features of adjustment might well wait for a more propitious season. But the primal necessity for shelter, like that for food, cannot be postponed or delayed. Somewhere to live is as imperative as something to eat. The unparalleled influx of whites, of itself, would have made the housing issue acute had not a single negro been involved, but the presence of the negro gave rise to a double order of complexity. He must needs be provided for, not only with the rest, but separately from the rest. There is little or no observable difference of sentiment on the part of the North and the South so far as segregation is concerned, except as it is affected by the relativity of numbers.

Peoples who feel themselves different on whatever basis of distinction this difference may rest will seek separate domiciliary areas. It boots little whether the basis of difference be racial, social or cultural. This is often done without any conscious sense of superior assumption on the one hand or self-debasement on the other. In the Pacific cities the Japanese and the Chinese live in self-sequestered communities by preference rather than by compulsion. There is no conscious sense of self-betittlement on the part of these non-white racial varieties. It often happens that a group conscious of its own idiosyncrasies prefers its own community, to live according to its own manners, habits and social customs without embarrassing proximity to alien onlookers. The Indian never seeks close residential relationship with the whites, but like Milton's Satan, feels that "furthest from him is best." But an inferiority complex which traditional sub-

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ordination has imposed upon the negro has well-nigh robbed him of racial self-esteem. His attitude toward the white race is that of the subjunctive mood. Unlike the Indian, the burden of his refrain is "nearer to thee." Anything that tends to racial separation in any form he regards as an invidious discrimination which pushes him still further from the plane of equality with his white overlord.

The white man, on the other hand, deems social assimilability impossible either now or at any future time. The dominant and controlling element in the case is the determined attitude of the white race to forbid residential promiscuity which, in turn, it is felt, would lead to social equality. According to the traditional bias of the American mind, the negro's color connotes inferiority. His birthmark is more opprobrious than the brand on the forehead of Cain. He must be colonized and penned in to himself as a race diseased. Intermarriageability is the acid test of good neighborhood. Wherever two easily distinguishable groups are forbidden to intermarry by law or custom, they will both find themselves uncomfortable in close residential proximity. The determination of the white race on this score is so firm and emphatic that it has been placed beyond the pale of argumentation and debate. The attitude on intermarriage, as well as its preliminary social intimacies, is well-nigh unanimous in the white mind. This attitude will determine the issue of segregation as long as it holds with tenacity and firmness.

There is a certain type of temperament among the negro intelligensia which dramatizes equality as the goal of all their strivings. To this group discrimination on account of race is the last word of abomination. The slightest suggestion of distinction meets with indignation. No form

of racial separation is tolerable. They decide the natural disposition to self-segregation as being derogatory to the doctrine of equality. To them agitation for rights is a more engaging pastime than calm and logical analysis of the factors involved in race advantage and advancement. The question often rises in the mind of the white people why intelligent, self-respecting negroes seek to intrude themselves upon white communities, since, in their view, exclusive racial neighborhood is but a proper assertion of race preference and privilege and leads to the peace and happiness of all concerned. The right-minded negro does not oppose segregation as such, but on account of its compulsory character and the resulting hardships. It is an infringement on his citizenship rights under the Fourteenth Amendment to limit by law, or by any other form of compulsion, his human or his property rights on the ground of race or color. The desire of peoples of like taste and disposition to live in their own communities on terms of easy social intimacy cannot be affected by anything which the negro can say or do. He knows quite well that no amount of agitation on his part can force residential promiscuity with white people where such association is unwellcome. Neither party could gain or bestow happiness by such means. On the other hand he cannot be expected to surrender in principle his constitutional right to the unrestricted use of property, unhampered or unhindered by race or color.

This seeming inconsistency is the inevitable result of the attempt to make race prejudice conform to logic. The protestation of the right-minded negro is more than a mere abstract assertion of his rights under the law. He is contending for real, concrete, practical advantages. If the unrestricted tendency to force segregation