

"AT THE CROSSROADS"

By CYRIL V. BRIGGS

THAT the Negro is at the crossroads is generally recognized by thinking people of both radical and conservative tendencies.

What is not generally recognized is that many other races have preceded the Negro to the crossroads of destiny and there hesitated awhile and finally made their choice and gone on to fame, power and respect, or to ignominy, impotence and race extinction.

The Israelites of old faced practically the same problems that the Negro faces today. So did many another people whose flight from "the land of bondage" was not honored by record in the Bible. The Negro in this country (America) is not oppressed merely because he is a Negro, but because he is weak. If there were no Negroes in America there would still be oppressed and oppressor. In all epochs of history the story is the same—of the strong oppressing the weak, of the weak being subjugated, repressed or exterminated. There is no Negro problem in Ireland, Poland and other lands of Europe, but there is, nevertheless, the problem of the strong and the weak, of the oppressor and the oppressed, of the subjugated Irish and the subjugating English, of the down-trodden Jews and the tyrannous Poles, of Czech and Magyar and many another combination of oppressed and oppressor.

It appears to be a part of human nature--as we know it, read of it and have experienced it—to want to "boss it over the other fellow." And questions of Socialism and Christianity enter very little into the problem. True Socialism, like true Christianity, is a promise of the distant future, rather than an achievement of the present. The ethics of Jesus Christ, the first and greatest of known Socialists, preached and disseminated around the world for nearly 2,000 years, have changed human nature very little, but have been greatly changed, camouflaged or diverted into strange channels by this perverse human nature. (As, note the reactionary tendencies of the church, its championship of the capitalist system, etc.) Yet human nature, or rather the human outlook, can be greatly changed, in our belief, by a careful process of education. But such a process of education to effect the changes required would have to extend over a period of hundreds—perhaps thousands—of years. And who wants to wait one or two thousand years for an alms of right that should be ours without begging and with the possibility that Socialism at the end of that period may be as degraded as Christianity is after the lapse of not nearly two thousand years, when experience

teaches that the strong never voluntarily relinquish their oppressive hold over the weak?

The writer is a Socialist. Any intelligent Negro who gave thought to the matter would be a Socialist. Most intelligent people—white and colored—are Socialists at heart, even if not at the polls. The writer looks upon political Socialism more as a stepping stone by which (by virtue of inter-racial alliances) can be achieved the political liberation of oppressed peoples than as a "cure-all" for the ills of the world. He believes that the vicious principle of "European eminent domain" could as easily flourish under a perverted form of Socialism as it now does under a perverted form of Christianity. And there are even now signs of perversion of the Socialist doctrines, both at home and abroad.

The Negro is at the crossroads and his predicament calls for serious thought and fearless, intelligent discussion. The tendency to abuse those with whom we do not agree, as well as the slavish fear to stand in the right "with two or three" must both be eliminated. Sentiment, too, and emotionalism must be thrown out of court. The destiny of a race is at stake, and the occasion calls for the most serious and comprehensive consideration of the factors governing the problem and the possibilities of a way out to safety, honor and power, rather than the downward slide of the road of least resistance to ignominy, impotence and extinction.

We have already seen that the chief factor in race problems is the existence side by side of widely differentiated racial groups and the resultant clash of ideals and interests. In the Negro's case the problem is only *accentuated*, not *created*, by reason of the great differences in the color of black and white peoples. The economic factor enters into the race problem only to the same extent that it enters into the relations of members of a single group, save that the existence of two opposing groups gives the capitalists (of both groups) unusual opportunities at economic exploitation. But white capitalists would as soon use (and have as often used) white scabs as they would use Negro scabs. They would as soon (and do) exploit the weak bodies of little white children as the weak bodies of little black children, and vice versa with the black capitalists should these ever attain full development. It is not, therefore, by overstressing the economic factor and ignoring the other factors that we can best serve our race in particular and humanity in general.

While other factors enter into the problem they are all of satellitic relation to the chief factor: the existence side by side of widely differentiated racial groups and the very human instinct which sets on the stronger group to tyrannize it over the weaker group. This instinct also fosters the imperialistic tendency and inspires the strong to extend their dominion over the weak of distant lands. But alien domination does not alone constitute a race problem. Moreover, alien domination, if unaccompanied by colonization, is comparatively easy of solution as against the solution of a problem created by the

existence side by side of two opposing groups. If these two groups are of equal or nearly equal strength and numbers, then what is known as a "balance of power"—based upon the mutual respect for the force possessed by each—is established, and clashes will be few and far between, but all the more bloody and terrible when they do occur because of the mutual preparedness and the equality of strength.

And now, as to the possibilities of solution or adjustment: These may be grouped under two main headings, thus:

(1) The probability of an ultimate, peaceful, just and honorable solution between the white and Negro peoples in residence side by side in America; and

(2) The alternative if such a probability does not exist or is not sufficiently strong to warrant our staking the future of our race and children upon it.

As to number one, we do not say that it is not possible. But we do say, and most emphatically, that it is highly improbable. Neither in the ample records of history nor in the light of contemporary experience is there aught that would give to the logical, honest, truth-seeking mind the slightest hope of the probability of solution along the lines of number one. Stronger has never yet voluntarily relinquished his strangle hold upon weaker. As in the days of Pharaoh and the Children of Israel so through the numerous pages of history to the present day. Our experience has been as harsh as that of other weak groups. No more, no less. And what is there to guide our faltering feet if not "the lamp of experience"?

Under number one may come all such suggestions towards solution or adjustment here as the "acquisition of education," "the ownership of property," "alliance with white labor," the "exercise of the franchise," "industrial and commercial development," the shifting North of the Negro population of the South (a policy latterly advocated by Dr. Du Bois among others).

Of these the exercise of franchise—the political factor—is the only one promising of results. In fact, without the franchise the others are either not attainable or cannot be protected when obtained. Mere ownership of property and possession of education do not in themselves protect the Negro. On the contrary, the educated and propertied Negro invites the envy, hate, spite and persecution of the whites. It is a recognized fact that the "white South" would rather have ignorant, illiterate, self-debasing and ne'er do well Negroes than educated, ambitious and prosperous Negroes whose self-respect will force them to demand the rights of men. In industry and commerce the Negro cannot attain his fullest development so long as there are so many handicaps of laws and sentiment against him. And these handicaps will remain so long as his is the weaker group. Nor would shifting the Negro population from the South solve the problem evoked by the existence side by side of two widely differentiated racial groups. It would merely shift the problem.

The exercise—fearlessly and industriously—of the franchise by the Negro would undoubtedly secure many beneficial results, but would just as surely bring about a reaction upon the part of the stronger group to prevent the attainment of "too much power" by the despised weaker group. This reaction may take the form of intimidation at the polls (as is now the case in some parts of the South where the Negro is not completely disfranchised by law) or it may take the form of a revision (where convenient) of political districts

to the end of breaking up Negro majorities that might make trouble for the bosses (as has been done several times in the case of the Harlem Negro population) or the reaction might take the form of complete and nation-wide disfranchisement of the weaker group. The form of the reaction will depend chiefly upon the determination and energy evinced by the weaker group. That such a reaction—in one form or another—would be inevitable should not, of course, influence us to any abject surrender of our franchise rights, but its inevitability constitutes one of the many important reasons why an open and intelligent discussion of our situation is absolutely imperative. We know that the white man would not hesitate to use any means within his power to maintain the unchallenged supremacy of the stronger, usually referred to in this country as "white supremacy." Therefore, the reaction against the determined use of the ballot by the Negro may well be the use of the bullet by the white man, or some attempt at scientific, but quite as murderous, annihilation.

Thus we may safely assume that any benefits and advantages achieved by the weaker group through exercise of the franchise will be of a temporary nature, and not permanent.

As to the proposed "alliance with white labor," when it is considered that white labor has only latterly and that most reluctantly, begun to admit Negroes to their unions, and that this reluctant recognition of Negro labor on the part of white labor was caused solely by the extremities to which white labor had been forced by the use of Negroes as scabs by the capitalists, what Negro in his senses can expect a continuance of the "alliance" when there is no capitalist system to menace white labor and consequently no necessity to fear the Negro as a club in the hands of the capitalist group?

(To be continued.)

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