

RACE PREJUDICE AND THE NEGRO

RUTH I. MCKENZIE

WHEN David Livingstone saw white men again after long months spent with African natives, he was shocked to discover that he found them repulsive. The white skin looked unnatural and sickly, like a plant deprived of sunlight. Likewise he reports that primitive Africans, at their first glimpse of white men, would take to their heels in fright. Such fear is universal. It is experienced by all people when confronted for the first time with members of another race distinguished by the colour of their skin or other obvious characteristic. The fear subsides, however, and the antipathy may change to attraction, provided it is not reinforced by other fears of a more serious nature. Unfortunately where one race is brought into conflict with another, as in the course of slavery or imperialism, very great fears arise which are often subconscious and are usually repressed. These fears emerge as race prejudice, with all its justifying myths and ideologies. The initial fear of the strange is then transformed into a conviction that the race of one's own complexion is naturally superior to that of another.

That the original feeling of strangeness and fear may be overcome was attested in the southern United States by the well-known devotion of white children to their negro mammies; by the frequent cases of miscegenation and the not infrequent examples of lasting attachment between white man and coloured mistress. The cruelty and gross injustice of the slave period have sometimes been excused on the ground that the negro's colour and feature mark him as not far removed from the animal in the cycle of evolution. This is an attempt on the part of white men to rationalize their own lack of humanity and their subconscious sense of guilt. And when the slave system was broken up by emancipation, the conflict that followed, with its attending hate and prejudice continuing down to our own day, was rooted in much more fundamental fears than that caused by the psychological distance between black and white.

As long as the rigid caste system of slavery lasted in the United States, relations between negroes and whites were defined by an unwritten but well-known code. Within the walls

of their caste many negroes were permitted wide privileges, and were admitted to the intimacy and affection of the master's family. The economic interdependence of slave and master was conducive to stability. Moreover, the slaves took a certain pride in belonging to aristocratic families, and considered themselves superior to the "poor whites" of the neighbourhood who could not afford slaves and had no social standing. Slavery was a system which, in many cases, worked to the satisfaction of both parties. The negro of the second or third American generation, divorced from his African culture and reared in the tradition of slavery, was, if fortunately placed, unambitious for freedom. Like all caste systems, slavery carried with it the assurance of one's known place in society, in contrast with the relative insecurity of less highly organized societies. For this reason, when the slaves were freed, many of them felt incapable of coping with the responsibility of directing their own lives, and begged to be kept on by the master. Others, less happy in slavehood, or perhaps above the average in intelligence, clutched at freedom and aggressively sought equality with the whites.

The freed negroes then began to invade territory formerly reserved for whites. Competition arose first in agriculture, then in industry; first in the rural South, then in the urban South, and finally in the North. Negroes were forced to accept the heaviest, dirtiest jobs in industry at the lowest rates of pay. This they were enabled to do by their lower standard of living. One result was to encourage the whites to believe that such labour and such wages are the natural lot of the negro. The latter, with his tradition of slavery, was inclined to share the belief. As time went on, however, and the negro became accustomed to freedom, his attitude changed. He tended to forget his former slave status, to demand higher educational privileges, and to force his way into all kinds of occupation including the professions. Increasing competition between the two races led to conflict which, in turn, produced racial hatred on the part of the whites and race consciousness on the part of the blacks. The whites felt their superior status threatened, not only because of the economic competition, but also because of the racial fear that the blacks, who were more prolific, might in time outnumber them.

Such are the very real fears that are at the root of negro prejudice. But these are not the reasons stated by the loudest advocates of negro suppression. What they say is: the negro

is black and therefore inferior; the negro is primitive and not far removed from the animal; the negro is immoral and incapable of learning. That there is no proved scientific evidence on which to base such conclusions, is beside the point. The claim is made on the basis of circumstantial evidence. No regard is paid to the fact that the negro has suffered for generations from unequal occupational and educational opportunities; or to the fact that he seems to possess distinct talent, particularly along artistic lines. As in all cases of race prejudice, the alleged reason for hatred is not the real one. The purpose, however, is always the same—to keep the hated race in a position of inferiority from which it is unable to challenge the power, economic, political or other, of the dominant race.

In the United States the negro is kept subordinate by a colour-bar enforced both by legislation and by social custom. This has led in the South to a dual scheme in all social institutions, and to strict segregation of the two races. In the North the dual system is lacking, but custom enforces a segregation almost as cramping in its results as the legalized form in the South. Negro prejudice in the States in its most rabid form has resulted frequently in lynching.

South Africa presents another example of the determined subjection of the black race by the white. There the native races so greatly outnumber the whites that the latter, in order to maintain their dominance, enforce a caste system. Natives are allowed employment only in the rougher, harder tasks in the mines, or in menial duties in the cities. Whites are never permitted to do work commonly done by natives. Segregation laws are strict, although these vary with the state. In general, the natives are forced to live in reserves or kraals outside the cities. They are deprived of most of the land. The right of franchise is almost useless, because it can be exercised only indirectly. Wages are unequal for blacks and whites, but the former can make no effective protest, because strikes are forbidden. Thus the natives are kept poverty-stricken, and incapable of making successful resistance to their rulers. If a native African does succeed in breaking away from his kraal and securing an education, he is miserable, because no suitable occupation is open to him, and he has lost his adaptability to the kraal. He is condemned by his colour to a life of servility and poverty. Only if he has sufficient foreign blood to make him appear white, can he hope to associate with educated Europeans.

In both South Africa and the United States the issue between black and white is confused by the presence of the "coloured" people. The mulatto in the United States is a constant reminder that the negro is penetrating white society. Not only is he indisputable evidence of miscegenation, but he tends to assimilate American culture and rise to responsible positions more rapidly than the pure negro. He is harder to "keep in his place", and is therefore hated and feared the more. Throughout the United States the penetration of the mulatto into white society is resisted by classing him with the negroes rather than with the whites, no matter how remote his negro ancestry may be. This method of classification dates back to the slave period, when the offspring of white men and negro women were unrecognized by their fathers, but left solely in the care of their mothers, who reared them with their black families.

In South Africa the term "coloured people" has a different significance. It signifies, in general, all those who are not European, native Bantu, or Asiatic. The majority of these are the Cape coloured, descendants of the early European traders and Hottentot women or negro slave-women. The term does not usually indicate the miscegenation of whites and "natives", by whom one means, in South Africa, the Bantus. It does not, therefore, imply the menace it implies in the United States. For this reason, as well as the tradition of race tolerance in the Cape province, the "coloured people" in South Africa are given special consideration. Although kept in a class inferior to the whites, they are, nevertheless, superior to the natives and are afforded certain privileges.

Where does Canada stand in its attitude toward the negro? Slavery did not play an important part in Canadian development, although it existed there to some extent prior to its general abolition in 1833. Canadians tended to share the horror of slavery felt by Americans of the North, and they played a part in helping refugee slaves to freedom. Negro settlements were established, notably in Nova Scotia and Upper Canada. These regions are still the main centres of negro population in Canada. Negroes, however, comprise only a fraction of a percentage of Canada's total population. This means that there is no Canadian negro problem. Nevertheless certain attitudes can be detected. Legally negroes have the same rights as members of any other race, and they share the same educational privileges. At the same time, custom decrees certain discriminations. Negroes are restricted largely to a few

unremunerative and servile types of employment. They are not always served in the best restaurants, nor admitted to high-class hotels. They are restricted, in cities, to the poorer residential districts, and are not accepted socially. Intermarriage with the whites is not approved. These evidences of negro prejudice are undoubtedly due, in part at least, to American influence. They would seem to indicate, however, that if Canada had a negro problem comparable to that of the United States, its treatment of the negro would be essentially the same. Fortunately for the negro, not all races view him with the distrust manifested by those of British origin. In countries peopled by the Latin races his history has been different.

Brazil was the centre of Portuguese slavery for three centuries. When slavery was finally stopped in 1888, the negroes outnumbered the whites. But in spite of the menace of numbers and the tradition of slavery, negroes in Brazil suffer little from racial discrimination. A negro may, if he has the means and the ability, rise to any position in the land. As a doctor, he may treat the whites when sick; as a lawyer, he may plead their cases at the law courts; and as a citizen, he may represent them in the Chamber of Deputies. Socially he is acceptable, according to his position, and intermarriage is not unusual.

What accounts for this lack of prejudice on the part of the Brazilian? There are three main reasons, all having a basis in history. In the first place, the Portuguese, who colonized Brazil, have never felt impelled to preserve their racial purity. Wherever they have come in contact with other races, they have mixed freely and interbred. Thus the Brazilian lacks a tradition of race prejudice. Secondly, the Portuguese, as staunch Roman Catholics, believed in the common fatherhood of God. Their slaves were baptized before being taken from Africa; their slaves' children were christened immediately after birth; and their priests ministered to the needs of blacks and whites alike. Thirdly, the custom arose early in Brazil of encouraging the manumission of slaves and the children of slaves. Freedom so secured was actual, not nominal as in the United States. At the time of emancipation there was already in Brazil a large class of free negroes who had found a place in society, and some of whom had risen to positions of prominence. The tradition of equal opportunity regardless of colour was thus established before emancipation, which came, therefore, without producing as great a shock to the social structure as in the United States.

Intermarriage in Brazil has proceeded to such an extent that relatively few Brazilians can boast of blood unmixed with Indian or negro. At the same time it is true that the blacks, for the most part, are content to be peasants, day labourers, and domestic servants. Consequently they bear the stigma of their class and occupation rather than of their race. Given sufficient ambition, the negro in Brazil is under no handicap, and his coloured half-brethren have risen to the highest positions in the land.

Similarly in Cuba, where the traditions are Spanish, distinctions have been based on class rather than on colour, though here, as in Brazil and for the same reason, the negro belongs usually to the lowest class. It was not until the coming of American industrial firms that segregation was thought of. These firms brought with them their American prejudices, and some of them have insisted upon separate residential areas for American white, Cuban, and negro workers. In such a way is race prejudice spread.

In the British West Indies, where there are British, French and Spanish traditions, it is not surprising to find a solution of the colour problem differing in certain respects both from the hard and fast colour-line policy of South Africa and the United States, and from its opposite in Brazil. Although the attitude towards the negro varies slightly in the different islands, it is, for the most part, one of tolerance resembling that of Brazil more than that of South Africa or the States.

The British West Indies, like Brazil, were early centres of the slave-trade, as the large plantations depended on slave-labour. The islands were not colonized by British families, as the American colonies were. Rather, a system of absentee landlordship prevailed. The estates were placed in charge of men who, for one reason or another, were willing to leave the comforts of home to risk the adventurous life of the Indies. These men were usually unmarried, and of a reckless, unconventional type. Many of them formed unions with negro slave-women and often, though not always, they emancipated the children of these unions. Sometimes their children were sent to England to be educated. On their return, these mulattoes often rose to positions of responsibility. Thus, contrary to the United States where mulattoes, generally, were treated no better than the pure negroes, in the British West Indies a large free coloured population had arisen before emancipation in 1833. Many of these people were prosperous business men

and landowners, forming the nucleus of the large middle class found in the West Indies now.

The masses of the labouring class in the British West Indies are black, but this does not mean that the blacks are confined to this class. There is no colour-bar, and no segregation. Business and professional opportunities are equal, and blacks are sometimes in positions of authority over whites. Socially the whites, especially those of English descent, tend to keep to themselves, and the mulattoes feel superior to the blacks. Intermarriage between whites and negroes is not approved, but it is accepted upon occasion as a necessary evil, and it is not inevitably followed by social ostracism. Whether or not negroes are accepted socially by the whites, depends to a great extent on the individuals concerned.

Because West Indian negroes and mulattoes are treated at home on their own personal merits rather than as members of a despised race, they expect and usually receive this consideration abroad. This is true in Canada, where West Indian negroes are preferred to those of American descent. In the United States all coloured people are tarred with the same brush, and West Indians suffer accordingly. This has led to race consciousness on the part of some West Indian negroes, who have joined forces with their American cousins in negro racial movements.

In this rapid survey of the world of negro prejudice, Brazil is the only country so far considered in which colour-lines are practically non-existent. Three other such countries may be mentioned: France, Soviet Russia, and Hawaii.

France is notoriously lacking in colour prejudice. Natives from the French colonies are permitted to sit in the Chamber of Deputies, and to achieve high rank in the French army. Negroes in France may go where they will, attend the same universities, amusement halls and social functions as the whites, and suffer no embarrassment on account of their colour.

In Russia, racial problems have been eliminated by economic and political reform, and a policy of cultural autonomy. Although negroes are not sufficiently numerous to present any particular problem, a number of them, descended from slaves sold in the ancient market at Constantinople, live around the shores of the Black Sea. In addition, a considerable number of American negroes are scattered throughout the country. These people are free from racial discrimination of any kind. There is, moreover, a negro soviet.

Hawaii is the world's greatest melting-pot. All races have met there, mingled and intermarried, so that a new race seems in process of evolving. The native Hawaiians, a dark race similar to the aborigines of New Zealand, have been almost completely absorbed by the foreign settlers of their country. How has this happened? Why, in this Pacific Island, have races of all colours met and fused as in no other place in the world? The answer lies in its geography and in its history.

The first white men to come to Hawaii were sailors, traders, adventurers—all men of an unconventional and emancipated type, freed of their native prejudices by extensive travel. They found it expedient to make friends with the native king and his people. Consequently they paid homage to the king, made trade agreements with him, and associated with the natives on terms of equality. Many of them married native women. The habit of racial equality, thus written early into the traditions of the country, has persisted down to the present. Chinese, American and European settlers have intermarried with each other and with the natives. The Japanese, alone, have stood aloof. Although not many African negroes have gone to Hawaii, those who have are permitted the same privileges and opportunities as members of other races. It is said that even Americans who emigrate to Hawaii learn to treat the negroes with respect, proving that in race relations, as in other matters, one does in "Rome" as the "Romans" do.

From the foregoing it is evident that race relations within a country are inextricably bound up with the history and traditions of that country, and the economic necessities of its people. Where there is excessive prejudice, as in the southern United States and South Africa, there is involved a grim struggle for status. The dominant class, the whites, in order to retain their power, endeavour to keep the blacks isolated, and to cripple them by a system of unequal rights. By humanitarian standards and democratic principles this cannot be considered a just solution. Furthermore, it is a policy which, dictated by fear, generates more fear, in a vicious circle.

Where prejudice is less apparent, as in the British West Indies, it is because years ago the white governing class found it necessary to admit the more numerous coloured people to a share in the conduct of the islands. This has resulted in amicable relations under the guise of racial equality. Scratch the surface, however, and you find the colour-lines are there.

Where there is a minimum of prejudice, as in Brazil and Hawaii, assimilation and absorption have been allowed to proceed unhindered. This has been at a price that Anglo-Saxons as a whole have never been willing to pay: that of their racial purity. It is true that the Anglo-Saxons, themselves, are not a pure race. They cling, however, to a fixed belief in the superiority of the white to the coloured races. As long as this belief is cherished, a policy of assimilation with the negro will not willingly be adopted in the United States or in any British colony. Nevertheless, assimilation proceeds, regardless of the punishment and social ostracism involved. The very knowledge that this is so intensifies the conflict and increases race prejudice.