

Education of the Negro eBook

Education of the Negro by Charles Dudley Warner

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THE EDUCATION OF THE NEGRO

By Charles Dudley Warner

At the close of the war for the Union about five millions of negroes were added to the citizenship of the United States. By the census of 1890 this number had become over seven and a half millions. I use the word negro because the descriptive term black or colored is not determinative. There are many varieties of negroes among the African tribes, but all of them agree in certain physiological if not psychological characteristics, which separate them from all other races of mankind; whereas there are many races, black or colored, like the Abyssinian, which have no other negro traits.

It is also a matter of observation that the negro traits persist in recognizable manifestations, to the extent of occasional reversions, whatever may be the mixture of a white race. In a certain degree this persistence is true of all races not come from an historic common stock.

In the political reconstruction the negro was given the ballot without any requirements of education or property. This was partly a measure of party balance of power; and partly from a concern that the negro would not be secure in his rights as a citizen without it, and also upon the theory that the ballot is an educating influence.

This sudden transition and shifting of power was resented at the South, resisted at first, and finally it has generally been evaded. This was due to a variety of reasons or prejudices, not all of them creditable to a generous desire for the universal elevation of mankind, but one of them the historian will judge adequate to produce the result. Indeed, it might have been foreseen from the beginning. This reconstruction measure was an attempt to put the superior part of the community under the control of the inferior, these parts separated by all the prejudices of race, and by traditions of mastership on the one side and of servitude on the other. I venture to say that it was an experiment that would have failed in any community in the United States, whether it was presented as a piece of philanthropy or of punishment.

A necessary sequence to the enfranchisement of the negro was his education. However limited our idea of a proper common education may be, it is a fundamental requisite in our form of government that every voter should be able to read and write. A recognition of this truth led to the establishment in the South of public schools for the whites and blacks, in short, of a public school system. We are not to question the sincerity and generousness of this movement, however it may have halted and lost enthusiasm in many localities.

This opportunity of education (found also in private schools) was hailed by the negroes, certainly, with enthusiasm. It cannot be doubted that at the close of the war there was a

general desire among the freedmen to be instructed in the rudiments of knowledge at least. Many parents, especially women, made great sacrifices to obtain for their children this advantage which had been denied to themselves. Many youths, both boys and girls, entered into it with a genuine thirst for knowledge which it was pathetic to see.

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But it may be questioned, from developments that speedily followed, whether the mass of negroes did not really desire this advantage as a sign of freedom, rather than from a wish for knowledge, and covet it because it had formerly been the privilege of their masters, and marked a broad distinction between the races. It was natural that this should be so, when they had been excluded from this privilege by pains and penalties, when in some States it was one of the gravest offenses to teach a negro to read and write. This prohibition was accounted for by the peculiar sort of property that slavery created, which would become insecure if intelligent, for the alphabet is a terrible disturber of all false relations in society.

But the effort at education went further than the common school and the primary essential instruction. It introduced the higher education. Colleges usually called universities—for negroes were established in many Southern States, created and stimulated by the generosity of Northern men and societies, and often aided by the liberality of the States where they existed. The curriculum in these was that in colleges generally,—the classics, the higher mathematics, science, philosophy, the modern languages, and in some instances a certain technical instruction, which was being tried in some Northern colleges. The emphasis, however, was laid on liberal culture. This higher education was offered to the mass that still lacked the rudiments of intellectual training, in the belief that education—the education of the moment, the education of superimposed information, can realize the theory of universal equality.

This experiment has now been in operation long enough to enable us to judge something of its results and its promises for the future. These results are of a nature to lead us seriously to inquire whether our effort was founded upon an adequate knowledge of the negro, of his present development, of the requirements for his personal welfare and evolution in the scale of civilization, and for his training in useful and honorable citizenship. I am speaking of the majority, the mass to be considered in any general scheme, and not of the exceptional individuals —exceptions that will rapidly increase as the mass is lifted—who are capable of taking advantage to the utmost of all means of cultivation, and who must always be provided with all the opportunities needed.

Millions of dollars have been invested in the higher education of the negro, while this primary education has been, taking the whole mass, wholly inadequate to his needs. This has been upon the supposition that the higher would compel the rise of the lower with the undeveloped negro race as it does with the more highly developed white race. An examination of the soundness of this expectation will not lead us far astray from our subject.

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The evolution of a race, distinguishing it from the formation of a nation, is a slow process. We recognize a race by certain peculiar traits, and by characteristics which slowly change. They are acquired little by little in an evolution which, historically, it is often difficult to trace. They are due to the environment, to the discipline of life, and to what is technically called education. These work together to make what is called character, race character, and it is this which is transmitted from generation to generation. Acquirements are not hereditary, like habits and peculiarities, physical or mental. A man does not transmit to his descendants his learning, though he may transmit the aptitude for it. This is illustrated in factories where skilled labor is handed down and fixed in the same families, that is, where the same kind of labor is continued from one generation to another. The child, put to work, has not the knowledge of the parent, but a special aptitude in his skill and dexterity. Both body and mind have acquired certain transmissible traits. The same thing is seen on a larger scale in a whole nation, like the Japanese, who have been trained into what seems an art instinct.

It is this character, quality, habit, the result of a slow educational process, which distinguishes one race from another. It is this that the race transmits, and not the more or less accidental education of a decade or an era. The Brahmins carry this idea into the next life, and say that the departing spirit carries with him nothing except this individual character, no acquirements or information or extraneous culture. It was perhaps in the same spirit that the sad preacher in Ecclesiastes said there is no "knowledge nor wisdom in the grave, whither thou goest."

It is by this character that we classify civilized and even semi-civilized races; by this slowly developed fibre, this slow accumulation of inherent quality in the evolution of the human being from lower to higher, that continues to exist notwithstanding the powerful influence of governments and religions. We are understood when we speak of the French, the Italian, the Pole, the Spanish, the English, the German, the Arab race, the Japanese, and so on. It is what a foreign writer calls, not inaptly, a collective race soul. As it is slow in evolution, it is persistent in enduring.

Further, we recognize it as a stage of progress, historically necessary in the development of man into a civilized adaptation to his situation in this world. It is a process that cannot be much hurried, and a result that cannot be leaped to out of barbarism by any superimposition of knowledge or even quickly by any change of environment. We may be right in our modern notion that education has a magical virtue that can work any kind of transformation; but we are certainly not right in supposing that it can do this instantly, or that it can work this effect upon a barbarous race in the same period of time that it can upon one more developed, one that has acquired at least a race consciousness.

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Before going further, and in order to avoid misunderstanding, it is proper to say that I have the firmest belief in the ultimate development of all mankind into a higher plane than it occupies now. I should otherwise be in despair. This faith will never desist in the effort to bring about the end desired.

But, if we work with Providence, we must work in the reasonable ways of Providence, and add to our faith patience.

It seems to be the rule in all history that the elevation of a lower race is effected only by contact with one higher in civilization. Both reform and progress come from exterior influences. This is axiomatic, and applies to the fields of government, religion, ethics, art, and letters.

We have been taught to regard Africa as a dark, stolid continent, unawakened, unvisited by the agencies and influences that have transformed the world from age to age. Yet it was in northern and northeastern Africa that within historic periods three of the most powerful and brilliant civilizations were developed,—the Egyptian, the Carthaginian, the Saracenic. That these civilizations had more than a surface contact with the interior, we know. To take the most ancient of them, and that which longest endured, the Egyptian, the Pharaohs carried their conquests and their power deep into Africa. In the story of their invasions and occupancy of the interior, told in pictures on temple walls, we find the negro figuring as captive and slave. This contact may not have been a fruitful one for the elevation of the negro, but it proves that for ages he was in one way or another in contact with a superior civilization. In later days we find little trace of it in the home of the negro, but in Egypt the negro has left his impress in the mixed blood of the Nile valley.

The most striking example of the contact of the negro with a higher civilization is in the powerful medieval empire of Songhay, established in the heart of the negro country. The vast strip of Africa lying north of the equator and south of the twentieth parallel and west of the upper Nile was then, as it is now, the territory of tribes distinctly described as Negro. The river Niger, running northward from below Jenne to near Timbuctoo, and then turning west and south to the Gulf of Guinea, flows through one of the richest valleys in the world. In richness it is comparable to that of the Nile and, like that of the Nile, its fertility depends upon the water of the central stream. Here arose in early times the powerful empire of Songhay, which disintegrated and fell into tribal confusion about the middle of the seventeenth century. For a long time the seat of its power was the city of Jenne; in later days it was Timbuctoo.

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This is not the place to enlarge upon this extraordinary piece of history. The best account of the empire of Songhay is to be found in the pages of Barth, the German traveler, who had access to what seemed to him a credible Arab history. Considerable light is thrown upon it by a recent volume on Timbuctoo by M. Dubois, a French traveler. M. Dubois finds reason to believe that the founders of the Songhese empire came from Yemen, and sought refuge from Moslem fanaticism in Central Africa some hundred and fifty years after the Hejira. The origin of the empire is obscure, but the development was not indigenous. It seems probable that the settlers, following traders, penetrated to the Niger valley from the valley of the Nile as early as the third or fourth century of our era. An evidence of this early influence, which strengthened from century to century, Dubois finds in the architecture of Jenne and Timbuctoo. It is not Roman or Saracenic or Gothic, it is distinctly Pharaonic. But whatever the origin of the Songhay empire, it became in time Mohammedan, and so continued to the end. Mohammedanism seems, however, to have been imposed. Powerful as the empire was, it was never free from tribal insurrection and internal troubles. The highest mark of negro capacity developed in this history is, according to the record examined by Barth, that one of the emperors was a negro.

From all that can be gathered in the records, the mass of the negroes, which constituted the body of this empire, remained pagan, did not become, except in outward conformity, Mohammedan and did not take the Moslem civilization as it was developed elsewhere, and that the disintegration of the empire left the negro races practically where they were before in point of development. This fact, if it is not overturned by further search, is open to the explanation that the Moslem civilization is not fitted to the development of the African negro.

Contact, such as it has been, with higher civilizations, has not in all these ages which have witnessed the wonderful rise and development of other races, much affected or changed the negro. He is much as he would be if he had been left to himself. And left to himself, even in such a favorable environment as America, he is slow to change. In Africa there has been no progress in organization, government, art.

No negro tribe has ever invented a written language. In his exhaustive work on the History of Mankind, Professor Frederick Ratzel, having studied thoroughly the negro belt of Africa, says "of writing properly so called, neither do the modern negroes show any trace, nor have traces of older writing been found in negro countries."

From this outline review we come back to the situation in the United States, where a great mass of negroes—possibly over nine millions of many shades of colors—is for the first time brought into contact with Christian civilization. This mass is here to make or mar our national life, and the problem of its destiny has to be met with our own. What can we do, what ought we to do, for his own good and for our peace and national welfare?

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In the first place, it is impossible to escape the profound impression that we have made a mistake in our estimate of his evolution as a race, in attempting to apply to him the same treatment for the development of character that we would apply to a race more highly organized. Has he developed the race consciousness, the race soul, as I said before, a collective soul, which so strongly marks other races more or less civilized according to our standards? Do we find in him, as a mass (individuals always excepted), that slow deposit of training and education called "character," any firm basis of order, initiative of action, the capacity of going alone, any sure foundation of morality? It has been said that a race may attain a good degree of standing in the world without the refinement of culture, but never without virtue, either in the Roman or the modern meaning of that word.

The African, now the American negro, has come in the United States into a more favorable position for development than he has ever before had offered. He has come to it through hardship, and his severe apprenticeship is not ended. It is possible that the historians centuries hence, looking back over the rough road that all races have traveled in their evolution, may reckon slavery and the forced transportation to the new world a necessary step in the training of the negro. We do not know. The ways of Providence are not measurable by our foot rules. We see that slavery was unjust, uneconomic, and the worst training for citizenship in such a government as ours. It stifled a number of germs that might have produced a better development, such as individuality, responsibility, and thrift,—germs absolutely necessary to the well-being of a race. It laid no foundation of morality, but in place of morality saw cultivated a superstitious, emotional, hysterical religion. It is true that it taught a savage race subordination and obedience. Nor did it stifle certain inherent temperamental virtues, faithfulness, often highly developed, and frequently cheerfulness and philosophic contentment in a situation that would have broken the spirit of a more sensitive race. In short, under all the disadvantages of slavery the race showed certain fine traits, qualities of humor and good humor, and capacity for devotion, which were abundantly testified to by southerners during the progress of the Civil War. It has, as a race, traits wholly distinct from those of the whites, which are not only interesting, but might be a valuable contribution to a cosmopolitan civilization; gifts also, such as the love of music, and temperamental gayety, mixed with a note of sadness, as in the Hungarians.

But slavery brought about one result, and that the most difficult in the development of a race from savagery, and especially a tropical race, a race that has always been idle in the luxuriance of a nature that supplied its physical needs with little labor. It taught the negro to work, it transformed him, by compulsion it is true, into an industrial being, and held him in the habit of industry for several generations. Perhaps only force could do this, for it was a radical transformation. I am glad to see that this result of slavery is recognized by Mr. Booker Washington, the ablest and most clear-sighted leader the negro race has ever had.

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But something more was done under this pressure, something more than creation of a habit of physical exertion to productive ends. Skill was developed. Skilled labor, which needs brains, was carried to a high degree of performance. On almost all the Southern plantations, and in the cities also, negro mechanics were bred, excellent blacksmiths, good carpenters, and house-builders capable of executing plans of high architectural merit. Everywhere were negroes skilled in trades, and competent in various mechanical industries.

The opportunity and the disposition to labor make the basis of all our civilization. The negro was taught to work, to be an agriculturist, a mechanic, a material producer of something useful. He was taught this fundamental thing. Our higher education, applied to him in his present development, operates in exactly the opposite direction.

This is a serious assertion. Its truth or falsehood cannot be established by statistics, but it is an opinion gradually formed by experience, and the observation of men competent to judge, who have studied the problem close at hand. Among the witnesses to the failure of the result expected from the establishment of colleges and universities for the negro are heard, from time to time, and more frequently as time goes on, practical men from the North, railway men, manufacturers, who have initiated business enterprises at the South. Their testimony coincides with that of careful students of the economic and social conditions.

There was reason to assume, from our theory and experience of the higher education in its effect upon white races, that the result would be different from what it is. When the negro colleges first opened, there was a glow of enthusiasm, an eagerness of study, a facility of acquirement, and a good order that promised everything for the future. It seemed as if the light then kindled would not only continue to burn, but would penetrate all the dark and stolid communities. It was my fortune to see many of these institutions in their early days, and to believe that they were full of the greatest promise for the race. I have no intention of criticising the generosity and the noble self-sacrifice that produced them, nor the aspirations of their inmates. There is no doubt that they furnish shining examples of emancipation from ignorance, and of useful lives. But a few years have thrown much light upon the careers and characters of a great proportion of the graduates, and their effect upon the communities of which they form a part, I mean, of course, with regard to the industrial and moral condition of those communities. Have these colleges, as a whole,—[This sentence should have been further qualified by acknowledging the excellent work done by the colleges at Atlanta and Nashville, which, under exceptionally good management, have sent out much-needed teachers. I believe that their success, however, is largely owing to their practical features.—C.D.W.]—stimulated

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industry, thrift, the inclination to settle down to the necessary hard work of the world, or have they bred idleness, indisposition to work, a vaporous ambition in politics, and that sort of conceit of gentility of which the world has already enough? If any one is in doubt about this he can satisfy himself by a sojourn in different localities in the South. The condition of New Orleans and its negro universities is often cited. It is a favorable example, because the ambition of the negro has been aided there by influence outside of the schools. The federal government has imposed upon the intelligent and sensitive population negro officials in high positions, because they were negroes and not because they were specially fitted for those positions by character or ability. It is my belief that the condition of the race in New Orleans is lower than it was several years ago, and that the influence of the higher education has been in the wrong direction.

This is not saying that the higher education is responsible for the present condition of the negro.

Other influences have retarded his elevation and the development of proper character, and most important means have been neglected. I only say that we have been disappointed in our extravagant expectations of what this education could do for a race undeveloped, and so wanting in certain elements of character, and that the millions of money devoted to it might have been much better applied.

We face a grave national situation. It cannot be successfully dealt with sentimentally. It should be faced with knowledge and candor. We must admit our mistakes, both social and political, and set about the solution of our problem with intelligent resolution and a large charity. It is not simply a Southern question. It is a Northern question as well. For the truth of this I have only to appeal to the consciousness of all Northern communities in which there are negroes in any considerable numbers. Have the negroes improved, as a rule (always remembering the exceptions), in thrift, truthfulness, morality, in the elements of industrious citizenship, even in States and towns where there has been the least prejudice against their education? In a paper read at the last session of this Association, Professor W. F. Willcox of Cornell University showed by statistics that in proportion to population there were more negro criminals in the North than in the South. "The negro prisoners in the Southern States to ten thousand negroes increased between 1880 and 1890 twenty-nine per cent., while the white prisoners to ten thousand whites increased only eight per cent." "In the States where slavery was never established, the white prisoners increased seven per cent. faster than the white population, while the negro prisoners no less than thirty-nine per cent. faster than the negro population. Thus the increase of negro criminality, so far as it is reflected in the number of prisoners, exceeded the increase of white criminality more in the North than it did in the South."

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This statement was surprising. It cannot be accounted for by color prejudice at the North; it is related to the known shiftlessness and irresponsibility of a great portion of the negro population. If it could be believed that this shiftlessness is due to the late state of slavery, the explanation would not do away with the existing conditions. Schools at the North have for a long time been open to the negro; though color prejudice exists, he has not been on the whole in an unfriendly atmosphere, and willing hands have been stretched out to help him in his ambition to rise. It is no doubt true, as has been often said lately, that the negro at the North has been crowded out of many occupations by more vigorous races, newly come to this country, crowded out not only of factory industries and agricultural, but of the positions of servants, waiters, barbers, and other minor ways of earning a living. The general verdict is that this loss of position is due to lack of stamina and trustworthiness. Wherever a negro has shown himself able, honest, attentive to the moral and economic duties of a citizen, either successful in accumulating property or filling honorably his station in life, he has gained respect and consideration in the community in which he is known; and this is as true at the South as at the North, notwithstanding the race antagonism is more accentuated by reason of the preponderance of negro population there and the more recent presence of slavery. Upon this ugly race antagonism it is not necessary to enlarge here in discussing the problem of education, and I will leave it with the single observation that I have heard intelligent negroes, who were honestly at work, accumulating property and disposed to postpone active politics to a more convenient season, say that they had nothing to fear from the intelligent white population, but only from the envy of the ignorant.

The whole situation is much aggravated by the fact that there is a considerable infusion of white blood in the negro race in the United States, leading to complications and social aspirations that are infinitely pathetic. Time only and no present contrivance of ours can ameliorate this condition.

I have made this outline of our negro problem in no spirit of pessimism or of prejudice, but in the belief that the only way to remedy an evil or a difficulty is candidly and fundamentally to understand it. Two things are evident: First, the negro population is certain to increase in the United States, in a ratio at least equal to that of the whites. Second, the South needs its labor. Its deportation is an idle dream. The only visible solution is for the negro to become an integral and an intelligent part of the industrial community. The way may be long, but he must work his way up. Sympathetic aid may do much, but the salvation of the negro is in his own hands, in the development of individual character and a race soul. This is fully understood by his wisest leaders. His worst enemy is the demagogue who flatters him with the delusion that all he needs for his elevation is freedom and certain privileges that were denied him in slavery.

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In all the Northern cities heroic efforts are made to assimilate the foreign population by education and instruction in Americanism. In the South, in the city and on plantation, the same effort is necessary for the negro, but it must be more radical and fundamental. The common school must be as fully sustained and as far reaching as it is in the North, reaching the lowest in the city slums and the most ignorant in the agricultural districts, but to its strictly elemental teaching must be added moral instructions, and training in industries and in habits of industry. Only by such rudimentary and industrial training can the mass of the negro race in the United States be expected to improve in character and position. A top-dressing of culture on a field with no depth of soil may for a moment stimulate the promise of vegetation, but no fruit will be produced. It is a gigantic task, and generations may elapse before it can in any degree be relaxed.

Why attempt it? Why not let things drift as they are? Why attempt to civilize the race within our doors, while there are so many distant and alien races to whom we ought to turn our civilizing attention? The answer is simple and does not need elaboration. A growing ignorant mass in our body politic, inevitably cherishing bitterness of feeling, is an increasing peril to the public.

In order to remove this peril, by transforming the negro into an industrial, law-abiding citizen, identified with the prosperity of his country, the cordial assistance of the Southern white population is absolutely essential. It can only be accomplished by regarding him as a man, with the natural right to the development of his capacity and to contentment in a secure social state. The effort for his elevation must be fundamental. The opportunity of the common school must be universal, and attendance in it compulsory. Beyond this, training in the decencies of life, in conduct, and in all the industries, must be offered in such industrial institutions as that of Tuskegee. For the exceptional cases a higher education can be easily provided for those who show themselves worthy of it, but not offered as an indiscriminate panacea.

The question at once arises as to the kind of teachers for these schools of various grades. It is one of the most difficult in the whole problem. As a rule, there is little gain, either in instruction or in elevation of character, if the teacher is not the superior of the taught. The learners must respect the attainments and the authority of the teacher. It is a too frequent fault of our common-school system that, owing to inadequate pay and ignorant selections, the teachers are not competent to their responsible task. The highest skill and attainment are needed to evoke the powers of the common mind, even in a community called enlightened. Much more are they needed when the community is only slightly developed mentally and morally. The process of educating

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teachers of this race, fit to promote its elevation, must be a slow one. Teachers of various industries, such as agriculture and the mechanic arts, will be more readily trained than teachers of the rudiments of learning in the common schools. It is a very grave question whether, with some exceptions, the school and moral training of the race should not be for a considerable time to come in the control of the white race. But it must be kept in mind that instructors cheap in character, attainments, and breeding will do more harm than good. If we give ourselves to this work, we must give of our best.

Without the cordial concurrence in this effort of all parties, black and white, local and national, it will not be fruitful in fundamental and permanent good. Each race must accept the present situation and build on it. To this end it is indispensable that one great evil, which was inherent in the reconstruction measures and is still persisted in, shall be eliminated. The party allegiance of the negro was bid for by the temptation of office and position for which he was in no sense fit. No permanent, righteous adjustment of relations can come till this policy is wholly abandoned. Politicians must cease to make the negro a pawn in the game of politics.

Let us admit that we have made a mistake. We seem to have expected that we could accomplish suddenly and by artificial Contrivances a development which historically has always taken a long time. Without abatement of effort or loss of patience, let us put ourselves in the common-sense, the scientific, the historic line. It is a gigantic task, only to be accomplished by long labor in accord with the Divine purpose.

“Thou wilt not leave us in the dust;
Thou madest man, he knows not why,
He thinks he was not made to die;
And thou hast made him; thou art just.

“Oh, yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood.

“That nothing walks with aimless feet,
That not one life shall be destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete.”