

## The Problem of the Negro

George J. Stigler, *The New Guard*<sup>\*</sup>, December 1965

voir le fac-similé en annexe

*"The task of our time has been to make the Negro discontented with himself, not with the white man"*

The leaders of Negro thought in America have done the members of their race one substantial service and one much greater disservice.

The service was to arouse discontent with the pace at which the social, political, and economic status of the Negro was rising. That the Negro has been becoming wealthier, better educated, more fully enfranchised, and less improperly treated by his white brethren is not seriously arguable. But the distance still to be covered is immense, and no man may say that the pace of 1940 or 1950 is the maximum that should be aimed at in raising the Negro's status.

Nor is the raising of discontent an easy or an uncourageous act. Long slumbering inequities become almost foreordained in their persistence, and a conscious and sustained and even dramatic challenge to the inequities is required. Nor will the leaders of the challenge, who disturb the comfortable flow of customary events, be treated with civility or respect—they are indeed deliberate trouble-makers.

For trouble is apparently the threshold of progress. A society does not respond quickly, or sometimes even at all, to calm rational arguments or to powerful ethical principles. The drama of personal injustice, the presence of devils (or at least of villains or prejudiced holders of privilege), full membership in the righteous, marching columns— these seem to be essential in any basic reform in the United States today (and perhaps in all countries always). So indignation must be produced, and remedies provided in catechism form.

### Wrong Target

The great disservice of the leaders of Negro opinion was to direct the discontent at the white population. It was proper to demand political rights that only a majority could confer. It was proper to ask the white population to assist in the rise of the Negro—a small enough restitution for the unreversible mistakes of the past. But it was a terrible disservice to identify the white man as the main obstacle to the rise of the Negro.

It was a disservice because it must lead to hatred, and hatred to violence, and violence to the retardation of the mounting compassion and assistance of the white man. Could the stream of demonstrations, growing in size and in insolence, approved or at least tolerated

---

<sup>\*</sup> publication of the conservatives Young Americans for Freedom.

by the political, intellectual, and religious leaders of the nation, have any other message for a semi-literate Negro teenager in a slum, than that evil prejudice of the white man was the fundamental cause of his low estate? Was he to be a metaphysician, distinguishing carefully the demonstration of the principle of the dignity of all men from the proposition that every inadequacy of his life was due to white opposition?

But the disservice was terrible for a more dreadful reason: it was false as a guide to improvement. The past is not for us to relive, and no amount of restitution for past injustice by the white man could solve the basic problem of the Negro in America. That problem is that on average he lacks a desire to improve himself, and lacks a willingness to discipline himself to this end. The task of our time has been to make the Negro discontented with himself, not with the white man.

### **Educational Needs**

Consider education. It would be easy to vote a Ph.D. for every young Negro in America—such a handsome restitution for past denial of educational rights! Good educational facilities, better facilities than whites have, are indeed a moral responsibility of the community to the Negro. The real task, however, is not to provide good schools and good teachers, but to create an unquenchable thirst for knowledge in the Negro youth. Schools beyond any need can be built in a few years: the love of knowledge and the willingness to work hard and achieve it are the product of cultural evolution. The Negro leaders should be helping the emergence of this cultural tradition, when instead they are diverting Negro energies to better school buildings.

### **Inferior Workers**

Consider employment. The Negro boy is excluded from many occupations by the varied barriers the prejudice can raise, and these must and will be struck down. But he is excluded from more occupations by his own inferiority as a worker, again on average. Lacking education, lacking a tenacity of purpose, lacking a willingness to work hard, he will not be an object of employers' competition. What leader of Negro thought is fostering the ancient virtues of diligence and honesty and loyalty? It is so much easier to seek quotas for Negroes.

Consider the Negro as a neighbor. He is frequently repelled and avoided by the white man, but is it only color prejudice? On the contrary, it is because the Negro family is, on average, a loose, morally lax, group, and brings with its presence a rapid rise in crime and vandalism. No statutes, no sermons, no demonstrations, will obtain for the Negro the liking and respect that sober virtues commend. And the leaders of Negro thought: they blame the crime and immorality upon the slums and the low income— as if individual responsibility could be bought with a thousand dollars a year.

It is not easy or popular to place the Negro's discontent upon himself. People will insist upon speaking of the previous or present faults of the white community, which numerous and deplorable—and now unimportant to the Negro problem. People will denounce any talk of the Negro's cultural and economic inferiority as racism, thinking no doubt that to ignore the heritage of past ignorance and vice and folly of the white man and the black man will eliminate the heritage.

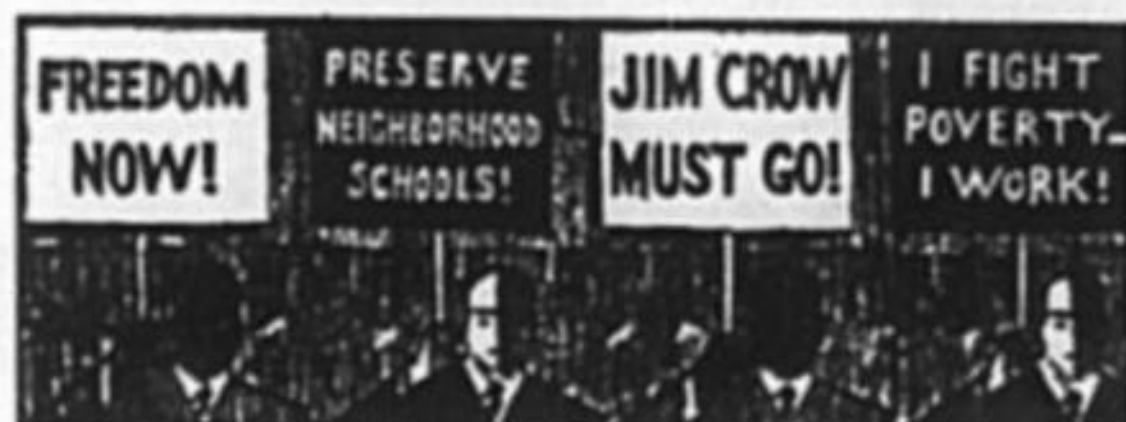
One would think that the lesson of the Jews in America would have been taken somewhat more to heart. The Jewish immigrants were on average poor, with meagre education, and confronted by a vast panoply of prejudice. They brought with them precisely the virtues that should be instilled in the Negro: a veneration and irrepressible desire for learning; frugality; and respect for the civilization of the western world. They have prospered amazingly, not only economically but educationally and socially and culturally, and in the process have enriched and adorned our society. They are in the rapid process of losing their identity—at the present pace in a few generations we shall all have a little, but only a little Jewish blood.

The direction of the Negro's discontent to himself is an unthankful task. How much easier to march on the mayor than to teach industry to a boy: how much simpler to keep the children home to coerce the school board than to instill in them a love of art and literature and science. The task does not allot a large role to the prominent leaders, and calls for different traits. Knowledge is more valuable than anger, and love more valuable than generosity in the task that faces us.

The leaders of Negro opinion are benevolent men, caught in the belief that the only arm of social improvement is the state. The Africans are poor and ignorant? Out with colonialism! The American Negro is a lesser citizen? To the barricades! No—to the home and church and school.



# The Problem of the Negro



*"The task of our time has been to make the Negro discontented with himself, not with the white man"*

By GEORGE J. STIGLER

The leaders of Negro thought in America have done the members of their race one substantial service and one much greater disservice.

The service was to arouse discontent with the pace at which the social, political, and economic status of the Negro was rising. That the Negro has been becoming wealthier, better educated, more fully enfranchised, and less improperly treated by his white brethren is not seriously arguable. But the distance still to be covered is immense, and no man may say that the pace of 1940 or 1950 is the maximum that should be aimed at in raising the Negro's status.

Nor is the raising of discontent an easy or an uncourageous act. Long slumbering inequities become almost foreordained in their persistence, and a conscious and sustained and even dramatic challenge to the inequities is required. Nor will the leaders of the challenge, who disturb the comfortable flow of customary events, be treated with civility or respect—they are indeed deliberate trouble-makers.

For trouble is apparently the threshold of progress. A society does not respond quickly, or sometimes

even at all, to calm rational arguments or to powerful ethical principles. The drama of personal injustice, the presence of devils (or at least of villains or prejudiced holders of privilege), full membership in the righteous, marching column—these seem to be essential in any basic reform in the United States today (and perhaps in all countries always). So indignation must be produced, and remedies provided in catechism form.

## Wrong Target

The great disservice of the leaders of Negro opinion was to direct the discontent at the white population. It was proper to demand political rights that only a majority could confer. It was proper to ask the white population to assist in the rise of the Negro—a small enough restitution for the unreversible mistakes of the past. But it was a terrible disservice to identify the white man as the main obstacle to the rise of the Negro.

It was a disservice because it must lead to hatred, and hatred to violence, and violence to the retardation of the mounting compassion and assistance of the white man. Could the stream of demonstrations, growing in size and in insolence, approved or at least tolerated by the political, intellectual, and religious leaders of the nation, have any other message for a semi-literate Negro

teenager in a slum, than that evil prejudice of the white man was the fundamental cause of his low estate? Was he to be a metaphysician, distinguishing carefully the demonstration of the principle of the dignity of all men from the proposition that every inadequacy of his life was due to white opposition?

But the disservice was terrible for a more dreadful reason: it was false as a guide to improvement. The past is not for us to relive, and no amount of restitution for past injustice by the white man could solve the basic problem of the Negro in America. That problem is that on average he lacks a desire to improve himself, and lacks a willingness to discipline himself to this end. The task of our time has been to make the Negro discontented with himself, not with the white man.

## Educational Needs

Consider education. It would be easy to vote a Ph.D. for every young Negro in America—such a handsome restitution for past denial of educational rights! Good educational facilities, better facilities than whites have, are indeed a moral responsibility of the community to the Negro. The real task, however, is not to provide good schools and good teachers, but to create an unquenchable thirst for knowledge in the Negro youth. Schools beyond any need can be built in a few years:

*Dr. Stigler, a former president of the American Economic Association, is the Charles R. Walgreen Professor of American Institutions at the University of Chicago.*



the love of knowledge and the willingness to work hard and long to achieve it are the product of cultural evolution. The Negro leaders should be helping the emergence of this cultural tradition, when instead they are diverting Negro energies to better school buildings.

### Inferior Workers

Consider employment. The Negro boy is excluded from many occupations by the varied barriers that prejudice can raise, and these must and will be struck down. But he is excluded from more occupations by his own inferiority as a worker, again on average. Lacking education, lacking a tenacity of purpose, lacking a willingness to work hard, he will not be an object of employers' competition. What leader of Negro thought is fostering the ancient virtues of diligence and honesty and loyalty? It is so much easier to seek quotas for Negroes.

Consider the Negro as a neighbor. He is frequently repelled and avoided by the white man, but is it only color prejudice? On the contrary, it is because the Negro family is, on average, a loose, morally lax, group, and brings with its presence a rapid rise in crime and vandalism. No statutes, no sermons, no demonstrations, will obtain for the Negro the liking and respect that sober virtues commend. And the leaders of Negro thought: they blame the crime and immorality upon the slums and the low income—as if individual responsibility could be bought with a thousand dollars a year.

It is not easy or popular to place the Negro's discontent upon himself. People will insist upon speaking of the previous or present faults of the white community, which are numerous and deplorable—and now unimportant to the Negro problem. People will denounce any talk of the Negro's cultural and economic inferiority as racism, thinking no doubt that to ignore the heritage of past ignorance and vice and folly

of the white man and the black man will eliminate the heritage.

One would think that the lesson of the Jews in America would have been taken somewhat more to heart. The Jewish immigrants were on average poor, with meagre education, and confronted by a vast panoply of prejudice. They brought with them precisely the virtues that should be instilled in the Negro: a veneration and irrepressible desire for learning; frugality; and respect for the civilization of the western world. They have prospered amazingly, not only economically but educationally and socially and culturally, and in the process have enriched and adorned our society. They are in the rapid process of losing their identity—at the present pace in a few generations we shall all have a little, but only a little, Jewish blood.

The direction of the Negro's discontent to himself is an unthankful task. How much easier to march on the mayor than to teach industry to a boy; how much simpler to keep the children home to coerce the school board than to instill in the a love of art and literature or science. The task does not allot a large role to the prominent leader, and calls for different traits. Knowledge is more valuable than anger, and love more valuable than generosity in the task that faces us.

The leaders of Negro opinion are benevolent men, caught in the belief that the only arm of social improvement is the state. The Africans are poor and ignorant? Out with colonialism! The American Negro is a lesser citizen? To the barricades! No—to the home and church and school.

---

## NIT-WITS!

Methinks . . . .

*Clifford is a sorry Case.*

*McGovern can't.*

*Lister is over the Hill, but*

*I like Gordon Allott.*

*J. W. is not Fulbright ideas as much as he thinks.*

*Whatever Birch is selling, I don't want to Bayh.*

*Joseph never sends us good Tydings.*

*Philip doesn't have a Hart.*

*Robert is a Byrd after Lyndon's own heart.*

*Joseph ought to go back to making Clark bars.*

*And Wayne ought to go back to perfecting his  
Morse code.*

*John Towers above his peers.*

*Gerald Ford sees a White House in his future.*

*Frank is letting Moss grow under his feet.*

*Stephen is not as Young as he used to be.*

*And isn't it too bad Hugh goes Scott*

*free no matter how he casts his vote?*

—PHOEBE IRMA ALPER

---