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James Weldon Johnson

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By James Weldon Johnson

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The Changing Status of Negro Labor*

James Weldon Johnson, Field Secretary, National Association for Advancement of Colored People, New York.

I am down to speak on the changing status of Negro labor. It might be well, in a dozen words, to trace the change in the status of the Negro during his history in this country, because it has a bearing on what I wish to say on the topic assigned to me. The Negro in America has passed through four distinct and well-marked epochs. The first began with the landing of twenty-odd naked savages on the shores of Virginia in 1619. The second had for its duration the great war in which he gained his physical freedom. The third was marked by the change in the organic law of the land which conferred upon him the rights of citizenship. And to-day he is going through a fourth epoch, an epoch which began with the hurling of the German armies through Belgium; an epoch in which he sees the beginning of his economic and industrial emancipation; an epoch which is big with spiritual meanings for him, because in it must be answered more fully than ever before the question, "Can full and unlimited democracy be realized for all the people, or is the hope of it a mere dream?"

We shall not attempt to review these epochs historically, or to trace the course of opinion regarding the Negro from the time when it was a question as to whether or not he had a human soul and could be made susceptible to religious teaching, or whether or not he had sufficient gray-matter in his skull to master the rudiments of learning and the intricacies of English speech, or whether or not he would revert to barbarism if given his freedom, down to the present time, when it is a question as to whether or not he shall be admitted to full participation in American democracy. There is no longer anything to be gained from discussing the Negro problem academically. Once it was popular, and still is among some backward people, to discuss theoretically whether the Negro is capable of advancement. The very shifting of the ground of controversy concerning the race renders any such discussion obsolete. We shall then go at once to the influences now at work on the Negro and to the efforts that he himself is making.

**An address delivered at the National Conference of Social Work, Kansas City, Mo., May 20, 1918.*

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Migration Northward

The present war set in motion a great many blind forces; that is, forces whose course was not foreseen when they were first unloosed and whose effect cannot now be controlled. These forces are at work all over the world, and many of them are operating directly upon the American Negro.

The most striking example of how some of these forces are operating upon the Negro is shown in the "exodus" from the South. As we know, when the war came it took thousands of men out of the industrial and labor fields in the North back to the colors of their native lands in Europe, and cut off the supply normally furnished by immigration, thus creating what might be called a vacuum in the industrial world. This resulted in a steadily increasing stream of Negroes from the South rushing into the North to fill the vacuum that had been produced. They have gone up by the thousands and tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands, until to-day the number is roughly estimated to be anywhere between half a million and seven hundred and fifty thousand.

At first there were many complaints about the shiftlessness of Negro labor; and it is true that a number of Northern employers, accustomed to steady workmen, had good cause for complaint. And there was a reason: the rush of Negroes northward was started by the railroads sending labor-recruiting agents South and having them spread the news that they had free transportation for as many men as wanted to go North to work at so much per day; these notices gave only a day or two to those who wished to take advantage of the offer. As a result, many of the most shiftless and unreliable of the race, attracted by the prospect of a trip North, were gathered in. The steady, reliable class would demand more time and more definite information before they would be willing to pull up and leave. However, by a natural process, this condition is being rectified. Since the first great rush, the people coming North are more and more largely of the steady, reliable class. This is due to the fact that agents are no longer recruiting wholesale in the South. The people who have come North and secured jobs are writing back to their relatives and friends to come on. This is by far the better method, for in most cases, those who write have their eyes on a job for those who come. This process is selective, and is already producing a steady flow northward of the best element of colored working people, who become adjusted economically and socially as soon as they arrive.

They are being engaged in many lines of industry, especially in the steel and allied industries, where large numbers from the southern iron districts are finding work in which they are already skilled. The demand is so great that notices of jobs for wages ranging from \$3.00 to \$6.00 a day are frequently read in the colored churches of northern cities. The opinion regarding Negro labor is constantly rising, and many employers are testifying that it is as good as any they

ever had. And so the Negro has this chance, the first in his history, to get his hand upon the thing by which men live, to become for the first time a real factor in the world of labor. He has at last come into what is rightfully his own, the opportunity that has heretofore been denied him and given to the stranger.

But the Negro comes up against a problem he has never had to face before, and that is union labor. In the North, in almost every field the unions shut him out, and he finds himself in the position of an independent or a scab. Many colored men skilled in their trades have had to turn to common labor because they were not allowed to join the unions. So after all, this thing we call the Negro problem and which we have thought of as a problem of the South is to-day coming before the North; and it is going to be curious to see just how the North will meet it.

Heretofore the Negro has had two choices,—that of living in the South where most of his manhood and civil rights were denied him, but where economically his condition was secure; or that of living in the North where his rights were guaranteed him, but where his economic condition was always precarious. In this attitude toward the Negro, the North has been almost as cruel as the South; for although the South, to use a figure of speech, denied him life, it offered him bread; while the North offered him life, but refused him that whereby he might live. Many problems connected with the shifting of Negro labor from the South to the North are to be met, and if they are met in a spirit of fairness and helpfulness the movement will exert a stronger influence on the status of the race than anything that has happened in its history since the adoption of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; it will mark the beginning of a great advancement not only in the economic status of the race, but also in its intellectual and political status.

Revelations of Army Statistics

The Negro himself stands almost amazed at some of the things that are coming especially to him out of this war. For example, ever since his emancipation there have been circulated what were reputed to be statistics on the Negro's health, showing that he was dying of consumption much more rapidly now than in the days before the war, and inferring that Negroes never had consumption before the war. The truth is, people did not know what Negroes died of before the war. And there have been insidious reports subtly spread about the physical condition of colored men. The Negro could not disprove these things, and people generally believed them because they were put forth as statistics. He stood helpless before the mass of figures compiled and given out, the results of observations that were necessarily limited and often prejudiced.

Now comes the great war, and the government summons three million of its young men between the ages of 21 and 31 from all over the country and submits them to identically

the same physical examination, and what are the results? To secure the number of white men required for the army, out of every 100 men examined, 25 were accepted; and to secure the number of black men required for the army, out of every 100 men examined, 36 were accepted. Here was an experiment conducted on so grand a scale that the figures cannot be questioned or doubted; these figures have become a part of the records of the government, and they prove, to say the least, that the young Negro manhood of America is just as fit and just as clean as the young white manhood of America.

I must confess that I myself had been impressed by the old statistics that have been handed around so long; so when I saw the records published by Dr. I. W. Brewer of the Medical Reserve Corps relative to the physical and mental condition of 165,000 applicants for the regular army, in which all of the diseases and the rejection rate per thousand were given in detail, I admit that some of the figures astonished me. I found that the rate of white men rejected for tuberculosis was higher than the rate of colored men, the figures being respectively 19.2 and 12.8; I found that the rate of white men rejected for alcoholism was higher than the rate of colored men, the figures being 34.1 and 7.8; I found that the rate of white men rejected for diseases of the genito-urinary system was higher than the rate of colored men, the figures being 25.4 and 23.2. And—I do not state it as a laughing matter—I found the rate of white men rejected for weakmindedness higher than the rate of Negroes. But a bigger surprise still. You know there is a joke about the Negro that is older than the Constitution itself, but I found that the rate of white men rejected for flat feet was higher than the rate of Negroes.

But all of these changes are merely phases of the great transformation that is being wrought in the entire race by the forces set in motion by the war. The most vital and far-reaching change is the one that has been wrought within the Negro himself. He has been seized by the spirit that has taken hold of all the submerged classes of the world. He is looking with wider but wiser eyes at what is happening. He has seen the breaking up and the melting down of the old civilization. He believes that something new and something better is going to be moulded, and I tell you he has made up his mind to have a hand in moulding this new thing that is coming to the world so that it may be a little nearer to the desires of his own heart.

That change is going on. The Negro is in contact with the current that is running around the world, and he is striving to see that this war will mean for him just what it promises—democracy for all the people of the world.

Contrast with Lynching

I saw in the papers to-day, in the same issue, contrasting articles like these: "General Pershing telegraphs about the valorous conduct of two Negro soldiers at the front; how in a hand-to-hand conflict with a number of Germans esti-

mated at more than twenty, fighting with rifles, hand-grenades and bolo knives, they repulsed them. These two Negroes were sentries on duty, and saved a great many of their comrades from falling captive." In the same paper I read that following the lynching of two Negroes at Valdosta, Ga., charged with the murder of a white citizen, another Negro was lynched to-day charged with implication in the murder, and then this Negro's wife was lynched for making "unwise remarks" about the lynching of her husband, and the mob is searching for a fifth victim.

(Editor's Note.—Since this time an investigation by the N. A. A. C. P. shows that at least eleven Negroes were killed by mobs at this time. A full report of that investigation is given in the September issue of the "Crisis.")

A short time ago I had the privilege of going with a delegation which brought this very matter to the attention of the President, and, speaking for the delegation, I asked that he say some word against lynching. I called to his attention then that within nine months three human beings had been burned alive in the single state of Tennessee. I rehearsed to him the horrible details of a burning which had occurred only three or four days previously. Jim McIllheron was a young Negro, twenty-odd years of age, who lived near Estill Springs, Tennessee. It appears that the white boys of that town had a habit of chasing the colored boys with rocks. They had chased Jim several times, but somehow or other he got tired of running, and bought himself a pistol. The next time they started to chase him he didn't run, but he opened fire and killed two, wounded a third and got away. Well, they got him after he had put up something of a fight; and when they brought him in they brought him on a stretcher, weak from loss of blood, one arm limp and one of his eyes hanging on his cheek. He was chained to a stake, and at a fire they heated irons red hot. The first lyncher to get a hot iron jabbed it at the boy's body; the boy instinctively grabbed it with his naked hand, and the lyncher pulled it through, taking the burning flesh off with it. They took those irons and seared his body from head to foot, into his eyes and down into his throat; they then poured oil over him and burned him alive.

We want this country to be a democracy, do we not? And we want to do our best in winning this war, do we not? Well, I tell you we can never be a real democracy until such things are remedied. And we cannot fight our best fight for democracy abroad while such things are tolerated at home. Righteous men and women North and South must rise up in their might and crush out this vile thing which otherwise will in time undermine all law and order in our land.

You may wonder how I feel about this as a Negro. I do not feel it merely as a Negro. I feel it doubly as a disgrace and danger to our country. I feel it as an American citizen. Some years ago I was in Paris and formed an acquaintance with a young man from Luxembourg. He spent

a great deal of time with me; perhaps he did so because he was studying English and wanted to try it out on the dog. And he was studying English because he wanted to come to the United States, which he had heard was a great country where you could make lots of money and all that sort of thing. I remember with what pride I told him about my country and its wonderful opportunities—I was simply an American citizen then—and I inflamed in him a desire to come. One day he asked me, "Is it true, did they ever burn a man alive in the United States?" My friends, I would have given anything if I could have answered, "No!"

A Call for Appreciative Response

The Negro is awake. He is awake to his rights and his wrongs, but he is awake to his duties and responsibilities as well. And although he feels these things keenly, he is not sulking in his tent during this most terrible crisis in the nation's history. He is doing his duty as he has always done it, all the way from Bunker Hill to San Juan Hill, and doing it willingly. He is also bearing his part of the burden; he is buying Liberty Bonds and Thrift Stamps and assisting in Red Cross and Y. M. C. A. work. In Kansas City the colored people have purchased nearly a half million dollars' worth of bonds. The Negro is going forward to his duty.

Some may well wonder what it is that sustains these people. I will tell you. There are two things: First, the Negro is American from the soil up. He bears no reserved allegiance to any potentate either on the Congo or the Nile. Second, he has never lost faith in the spirit in which this nation was founded. He believes that spirit, though balked and thwarted, will finally triumph. So he goes forward to his duty, and he offers it as a plea and he flings it as a challenge to the nation to do its duty by him.

So I call upon Americans all over this land, North and South; I call upon you in the name of the high ideals on which this war is being fought and in the name of common humanity; I call upon you in behalf of the race whose three hundred years of labor and loyalty and patience and faith entitle them to just consideration; I call upon you in the name of the black men who are now marching by your side, they who have put aside memories of old wrongs and risen above thoughts of vengeance, who march to war with songs on their lips and visions in their eyes of peace through brotherhood; I call upon you to see to it when they come back, bringing that flag as they have always done, without a single dishonorable stain upon it, that they receive here in their native land what they are fighting for over there.



National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

70 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

1. To abolish legal injustice against Negroes.
2. To stamp out race discriminations.
3. To prevent lynchings, burnings and torturings of black people.
4. To assure to every citizen of color the common rights of American citizenship.

President Wilson declared for woman suffrage as a war measure. Black men are not allowed to vote in many of the states of the Union, despite the Fifteenth Amendment.

5. To compel equal accommodations in railroad travel, irrespective of color.
6. To secure for colored children an equal opportunity to public school education through a fair apportionment of public education funds.

Unless the colored child can be educated he is at a fearful disadvantage. An uneducated Negro population menaces national well-being. This education should be of hand and brain and can be adequately done for all negro children, not the fortunate few, only by public schools.

7. To emancipate in fact, as well as in name, a race of nearly 12,000,000 American-born citizens.

The only means we can employ are education, organization, agitation, publicity—the force of an enlightened public opinion.

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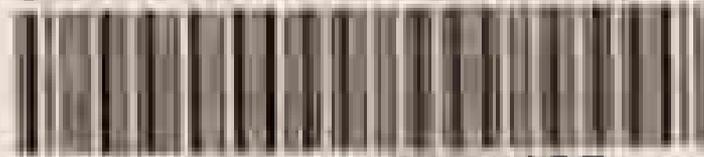
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