Taking Stock of the Race Problem: A Statistical Review, and Interpretation of the Facts at the End of the Year 1923

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# Taking Stock of the Race Problem: A Statistical Review, and Interpretation of the Facts at the End of the Year 1923

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## Statement of Facts

Some of the important facts about the Negroes of the nation in 1923 are: they are increasing numerically, they are a forward looking group and are making rapid progress. On the other hand, there is still a great deal of ignorance, inefficiency, poverty, and general backwardness to be found among them. As a group the Negroes of the country are optimistic, their confidence in themselves is increasing, they are trying to do the same things, make the same achievements which the white people have made. This is not a slavish imitation of the white man; it is a most serious effort to master modern civilization and to make it his own.

The 1920 census reported the Negro population of the nation to be 10,463,131, or 9.9 per cent of the total population. The proportion of Negroes in the total population is steadily decreasing mainly because of the rapid increase of the white population through immigration. The Negroes, however, constitute a considerable element of the population and the indications are that for a great many decades to come they will continue to do so.

The rate of increase of the Negro population, 6.5 per cent in 1920, as compared with 11.2 per cent increase for 1910 would appear to indicate that the Negro population is rapidly approaching a stationary state. It is of interest to note that for the decade 1860-1870 the rate of increase was 9.9 per cent, almost as low as for 1920.[1](#fn1) The rate of increase for Negroes, 1850-1920, shows great fluctuation, part of which is explained by census revisions. The greater part of the difference between the rates of increase in 1850, 1860 and 1870 is due to the sudden change in the status of the Negro as a result of emancipation. The Negro was released from the soil and permitted to move about with a freedom and facility which he had not heretofore possessed. A somewhat similar state existed in the five years, 1916-1920. During this period there occurred the greatest economic and social change which the Negro had experienced since emancipation. This change was almost as sudden as that of emancipation and was accompanied by an even greater movement of population. The results in both periods because of this sudden change and great movement of population were that many Negroes were probably not enumerated in the census and that birth and death rates were both affected.

Per Cent Increase of White and Negro Population, 1850-1920

| Census Years | White | Negroes |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1850 | 37.7 | 26.6 |
| 1860 | 37.7 | 22.1 |
| 1870 | 24.8 | 9.9 |
| 1880 | 29.2 | 34.9 |
| 1890 | 27 | 13.5 |
| 1900 | 21.2 | 18.0 |
| 1910 | 22.3 | 11.2 |
| 1920 | 16 | 6.5 |

The indications are that the migrations of 1916-1920 and of 1922-1923 will probably not have as great an affect on the change of the proportion of Negroes North and South as is popularly supposed. What is happening is that while there is a rapid increase of the number of Negroes in the North the total number of Negroes remaining in the South continues to increase. This total in 1910 was 8,749,427 and in 1920, 8,912,231.

The movement of Negroes to the North is not to this section as a whole but rather to a few industrial centers. It is found that 1,139,505, or 73.4 per cent of the Negro population of the North is living in ten industrial districts, as follows:

| Industrial Districts | Negro Population |
| --- | --- |
| Indianapolis District | 47,550 |
| Detroit—Toledo District | 55,918 |
| Cleveland—Youngstown District | 58,850 |
| Kansas City District | 65,393 |
| Pittsburgh District | 88,273 |
| Columbus-Cincinnati District | 89,651 |
| St Louis District | 102,607 |
| Chicago District | 131,580 |
| Philadelphia District | 248,343 |
| New York District | 251,340 |
| Total | 1,139,505 |

The so-called migration to the North is a part of the movement of Negroes to cities, both North and South. The increase of Negro urban population in the South, 1910-1920, was 396,444, or 56,000 more than the increase for the same period in the number of Negroes in the North from the South, 340,260. More than one-third, 34.0 per cent, of the total Negro population is living in urban territory. The census reports show an actual decrease of 234,876, or 3.4 per cent, in the Negro rural population of the country. In 1910 the number of Negroes reported as living in rural territory was 7,138,534. In 1920 the number thus living was reported to be 6,903,658.

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Number and Per Cent of Negroes in United States Living in Urban and Rural Communities, 1890-1920

| Year | Number Urban | Rural | Per Cent Urban | Rural |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1920 | 3,559,473 | 6,903,658 | 34.0 | 66.0 |
| 1910 | 2,689,229 | 7,138,534 | 27.4 | 72.6 |
| 1900 | 2,005,972 | 6,828,022 | 22.7 | 77.3 |
| 1890 | 1,481,142 | 6,007,534 | 19.4 | 80.6 |

It would appear that the tendency for the concentration of Negroes in the black belt sections of the South is decreasing. The census reports show that these sections of the South in which there is a more rapid increase of Negroes do not correspond with the area of maximum density of Negro population. The number of counties in the South having half or more of their population Negroes is decreasing. \_ There is also a decrease in the total Negro population of these counties. In 186U there were in the South 244 counties in which half or more of the population were Negroes. The number of these counties in 1880 was 300; in 1890 the number was 282; in 1900 the number was 286; in 1910 the number was 264; and in 1920 the number was 219; that is the greatest number of these counties was in 1880 and the smallest number was in 1920. The population of the counties having half or more of their population Negroes was in 1880, 3,392,235; in 1890, 3,555,970; in 1900, 4,057,619; in 1910, 3,932,484; and in 1920, 3,242,439.

The white population of the South is increasing at a more rapid rate than the Negro population with a result that the proportion of Negroes in the population of the South is decreasing. In 1900 the percentage of Negroes in the South’s population was 32.3; in 1910, 29.8; and in 1920, 27.0. There are now no cities of importance in the United States in which 50 per cent or more of their population are Negroes. It is very probable that the 1930 census will show that South Carolina and Mississippi will have a majority of whites. In 1920 Negroes constituted 51.4 per cent of the population of South Carolina and 52.2 per cent of the population of Mississippi.

The most recent available information indicates that the health of Negroes is improving. The death rates for Negroes are considerably higher than those for whites. Mortality statistics indicate that the death rates for both races are decreasing.

Death Rate per 1,000 for the Registration Area

|  | 1910 | 1911 | 1912 | 1916 | 1920 | 1921 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| White | 14.5 | 13.7 | 13.5 | 13.5 | 12.8 | 11.4 |
| Colored | 24.2 | 23.6 | 22.9 | 20.5 | 18.4 | 16.0 |

It appears that there is a greater decrease in the death rates for Negroes in recent years than that for whites. The decline of the rate for whites in the registration area in the period 1910-1921 was 22.7 per cent; that for Negroes, 33.8 per cent. The death rate for Negroes now is about what it was for whites twenty years ago. The rate for whites in 1900 was 17.1 per cent; that for Negroes in 1921 was 16.0 per cent. It further appears that at any one time the death rate among Negroes compares favorably with that of whites in many foreign countries as, for example, in 1910 the death rate was for Hungary, 23.6 per cent; Rumania, 24.8 per cent; Spain, 23.3 per cent; Austria, 21.3 per cent; Negroes of the United States, 24.2 per cent.

Life insurance tables show that there is a broadening of the lifespan of insured Negroes. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company recently stated that in the two years, 1911–1912, the expected life-span of the colored male policyholders at age ten was 41.32 years. In 1922, the expectation was 46.74 years, an increase of about 5 1/2 years or 13.1 per cent. The increase of life expectancy during the same period for insured white males was 6.3 years or 13.8 per cent. The life expectancy for colored female policyholders at age ten increased from 41.30 years in 1911-1912 to 46.07 years in 1922 which is a gain of about 5 years or 11.5 per cent and is a better record than the increase, 3.8 years or 7.5 per cent for insured white females. Thk indicates that better economic conditions and better living conditions and changes in life and labor which have recently come to the Negro are tending to increase his lifespan.

When compared with the wealth of the nation the wealth of Negroes is small. Since their emancipation, however, the property accumulation of Negroes has rapidly increased from some $20,000,000 in 1866 to over $1,500,000,000 in 1923. Through purchases and increases in value, their property holdings are increasing at the rate of about $50,000,000 per year. The lands which they now own amount to more than 22,000,000 acres or over 34,000 square miles, an area greater than that of the five New England States, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. Home owning is an important phase of property accumulation. It is estimated that Negroes now own over six hundred thousand homes; that is, one home out of every four which they have established is owned. This is a remarkable showing and has great significance for the future of the race. It is safe to say that any people, starting with a handicap of poverty and ignorance, who can in fifty years become owners of one-fourth of all the homes which they occupy are making progress along those lines which make for a high degree of citizenship.

With respect to the education of the Negro it is found that there is much improvement. The illiteracy of the group has decreased from 70.0 per cent in 1880 to 22.9 per cent in 1920. Negro education in 1923 shows great progress when compared with that of former years. This is true with respect to equipment and facilities both in public schools and secondary’ schools and in colleges. Formerly the same schools did work from the kindergarten to college and professional training. The tendency now is to confine a particular grade of work to schools of that grade; that is, elementary work to elementary schools, secondary work to secondary schools, and collegiate work to colleges. Although during the past fifty’ years there has been 43 great progress in Negro education the equipment and facilities in Negro schools today are on the whole far below those in white schools. A large part of the rural schools in the South are still without school buildings and the average length of the terms of many of these schools is still from three to five months. Although the Negroes constitute about 11 per cent of the total population of the country, only a little more than 2 per cent of the $1,300,000,000 expended annually for education is spent upon them.

The Negroes as a group are rising in the scale of occupations and now have a better economic footing than at any time since their emancipation. The Negroes in 1923 are found in many and varied occupations; in fact, there are very few, if any, occupations or grades of occupations in which there are not some Negroes. The distribution of Negroes ten years and over with reference to occupations as reported in the 1920 census is shown in the following table:

| Occupations | Number | Per Cent |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Agriculture | 2,178,888 | 45.2 |
| Domestic and Personal Service | 1,064,590 | 22.1 |
| Manufacturing and Mechanical Industries | 886,810 | 18.4 |
| Trade and Transportation | 452,888 | 9.4 |
| Professional Work | 80,183 | 1.7 |
| Mining Industries | 73,229 | 1.5 |
| Public Service, Municipal, State and Federal | 50,552 | 1.0 |
| Clerical Occupations | 37,011 | 0.8 |

### The Negro and Civil Rights

The status of the Negro with respect to civil rights in 1923 is that he must look to the several states for whatever civil rights he wishes to secure under the guarantee of the Constitution through the 14th Amendment. After the United States Supreme Court in 1883 declared the Civil Rights Bill of 1875 unconstitutional, the burden of securing for the Negroes equality of accommodations in public places was placed upon the states. Since that time seventeen states outside of the South have adopted civil rights bills which practically copied the Civil Rights Bill of 1875. These states are Connecticut, Iowa, New Jersey, Ohio, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, Wisconsin and California.

Laws for the separation of races in public conveyances are now in force in Tennessee. Florida, Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Kentucky, Arkansas, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and Oklahoma.

Separate school laws with respect to races are now in force in Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Laws to restrict the suffrage with special application to the Negro are now in force in Mississippi, South Carolina, Louisiana, North Carolina, Alabama, Virginia, Georgia and Oklahoma.

The laws restricting suffrage appear to operate to disfranchise both whites and Negroes. An indication of this is shown by a comparison of the votes cast in Southern States in the 1920 presidential election with the number of males, white and Negro, of voting age in these states. It appears that from one-half to four-fifths of the males of voting age are not voting, 83 per cent in South Carolina and 58 per cent in Alabama. Because of the growing intelligence of Negroes in the South and the progress which they are making along all lines, suggestions are being made with respect to their admission to a greater extent to the exercise of the franchise. Some of the prominent white newspapers of the South have stated that it would be a good thing to increase the number of Negro voters and “It would not endanger white supremacy and it could not lead to Negro supremacy.” In spite of disabilities Negroes are taking more and more interest both North and South in politics. The Negro newspapers of the South are urging Negroes to qualify for voting. As over against national politics the tendency appears to be to take more and more interest in local politics. The reason for this is that Negroes are appreciating to a larger extent those civic advantages which come largely through politics; such as better educational facilities, better police protection, better sanitary conditions, etc.

### A Growing Race Consciousness

The racial struggle of the years has gradually resulted in the Negro thinking largely in terms of his race, and as a result of this there has evolved a racial consciousness. This race or group consciousness of the Negro is growing. This growth is manifesting itself in various ways important among which are an increasing interest in race literature, more faith in race leadership, a demand for patronage of Negro businesses, a tendency to boycott white firms which do not treat the Negro with courtesy, and a tendency to move away from communities in which lynchings have occurred.

Organization is an indication of the growth of racial consciousness. This means not only organizations through the church, through secret societies, but also organizations for the betterment of conditions, for better educational facilities, for civic improvement, for economic development, and for greater participation in politics. There are among Negroes national organizations as follows: professional, (including education, law, and medicine); business; labor, for political and civic advancement; and organizations in the interest of women.

Another phase of the growth of race consciousness is that the Negro is developing a literature of his own. Through his numerous newspapers, periodicals, books, and articles he is becoming more and more able to set forth his own needs, to state his own case, and to champion his own cause.

### Race Relations 44

Since the Negro and the white man live as two separate groups the relations of these groups present a situation that has become a matter of vital importance to both races. The main facts about race relations are that prejudice and discriminations continue. There are lynchings and occasional riots. There is an apparent growth and spread of both tolerance and intolerance. This is a result of a wider and a more continued contact which the Negro group is establishing with the white group. The friendly relations of the two groups are being furthered by the inter-racial cooperation movement which is bringing representatives of the two groups into working relations with each other. The spirit of inter-racial cooperation appears to be growing. There is more and more of a disposition for the white people of the South to aid in efforts for the betterment of conditions among Negroes. Another phase of race relations is that the Negro group is tending to share to a larger degree in the community life. Its importance as a part of the community is being more and more recognized and community activities are being extended to this group. This group is also being asked to participate in the community activities, and as a result, the Negro group is tending to take a more active part in community life.

### The Negro Is an Asset of the Nation

The Negro is one of the most valuable assets of the nation’s population elements. The conditions brought about hy the World War gave the Negro opportunity to demonstrate in a striking way his importance as an economic asset to the nation. The crisis which developed in the nation by reason of the World War disclosed the fact that many elements of the population were a weakness to the nation and in some instances a hindrance and a danger. It was found that the Negro along with the native American element was one of the strongest assets which the nation had and that in every instance he remained loyal to the nation in spite of German propaganda. When called upon to contribute of his wealth for the prosecution of the war he made a proportionately larger contribution than did any other group. Over $225,000,000 was contributed which is more than $20 for each man, woman, and child of the race. The Negroes offered themselves freely for service in the World War and furnished a larger percentage for their group than did the whites for their group—70.41 per cent of the whites and 74.60 per cent of the Negroes were accepted for service, and 26.84 per cent of the whites and 31.74 per cent of the Negroes were accepted for full military service. As combat troops, as pioneer and working battalions, and in whatever service the Negro was placed he acquitted himself with credit and honor. They were the first soldiers of the American expeditionary forces to get into action and the first soldiers of the American army to be decorated for bravery.

## II. Analysis and Interpretation

In order to properly analyze and interpret the race problem in 1923 it is important to first consider the problem historically; that is, what was the race problem in the United States in the Ante-Bellum Period and in the Reconstruction Period. It is also well to point out what have been the permanent factors and elements in the race problem during these periods. These permanent factors and elements appear to be race differences, race prejudice, racial friction or race conflict, and efforts for racial adjustment. These factors and elements are found to be present and to constitute the race problem anywhere at any time.

During the Ante-Bellum Period there was both a slavery question and a race question and both were concerned with the same group of people. The slavery question was in the main a question of status; that is, whether those Negroes held as slaves should continue tof be slaves or be freed. The race question in the main was one of relations and while including status it was broader because it dealt with relations of black and white whether bond or free. The main features of the race problem during the Ante-Bellum Period were the questions of the relation of master to slave, the right of the slave, the laws relating to the slave, the rights of the free Negro and the laws relating to him and restrictions imposed upon him. The Post-Bellum Period, that is, the Period of Reconstruction, saw the Negro group change from a group part of which was free and part slave with the free only a little above that of the slave as to status and citizens’ rights to a group which under the Constitution was accorded all the rights and privileges that had hitherto been accorded only to the white group. This sudden change from the status of slaves and free Negroes to freedmen with full citizenship rights resulted in much confusion and conflict and also in violence which found its expression in the riots of the Reconstruction Period and in the reign of the Ku Klux Klan. Organized discriminations found their expression at a somewhat later period in laws which restricted the rights and privileges of the Negro with respect to schools, with respect to public places, public conveyances, and with reference to the franchise. These restrictions were to a very large degree modified applications of the restrictions which in the Ante-Bellum Period had been imposed upon the free Negro.

In the Ante-Bellum Period the problem of racial adjustment was primarily that of accommodation; that is, of adjusting the slave group to the interests and needs of the master group without any change in status of the slave group and without any special effort to better the social and moral conditions of the group. The basis of adjustment in the Post-Bellum Period and since has been primarily that of assimilation; that is, to take this group of freedmen and by giving them the opportunity for economic, educational, moral, and religious development to 45 make them a real part of the nation. The two phases of adjustment, accommodation and assimilation, while in a sense complementary to each other, have continued to the present time in more or less opposition to each other. The accommodation phase of adjustment has been largely expressed in the efforts to continue to keep the Negro in the same relations to the white group as obtained during the period of slavery. This has been crystallized in the expression, “Keep the Negro in his place.” It is well to point out here that by assimilation is not meant either miscegenation or amalgamation, although the mulatto element in the Negro group is increasing not so much, however, through miscegenation as through marriage within the group; that is, the marriage of the mulatto with mulatto and the marriage of the mulatto with the so-called black.[2](#fn2)

### Methods of Dealing with the Race Problem

Until recently the race problem has been dealt with largely from a coercive standpoint. By the coercive method we mean that adjustment is sought by agitation and compulsion particularly by means of the enactment of laws. In the handling of the race problem, as of other social problems, agitation and coercive methods have their place and their value.

During the Reconstruction Period and for some considerable time after, the major portion of the discussion of the race problem was largely in northern periodicals by means of articles written by northern writers, by Negroes, and by southern writers. The present tendency in the discussion of the race problem is that, in general, these discussions and suggestions are more and more often being published in the press of the region where the particular phases of the problem in discussion exist. Whereas formerly the greater part of the discussion of the race problem was in the magazines, by far the greater portion of the present discussions are in the newspapers, white and colored. The present tendency with reference to discussing the race problem in the South by residents of that section appears to be that when an individual, white or black, wishes to express himself on the race problem he more often publishes his views in a southern paper than in a northern paper, thus more affectively molding opinion in the section in which he lives.

The next step resulting from this molding of opinion is the coming together of whites and Negroes in conferences with reference to outlining a basis of adjustment. We have as a result and as an outgrowth of these conferences what is known as the Inter-racial Cooperation Movement, which is primarily an effort of southern whites and Negroes to get together on a basis of cooperation.

The inter-racial conference method of handling the race problem has universal application. The general advantage is that representatives of the interested groups may meet face to face and outline a policy that is of mutual benefit to both groups. Another aspect of the universality of this method is that it is very closely related to and embodies the idea of working with and not for a group. Under assimilation (the inter-racial method), things are done for the best interest of the two groups and for the general good. But under the accommodation method things are done by one group for the other.

There was inter-racial cooperation during both the Ante-Bellum and Post-Bellum Periods. The Post-Bellum Period was especially notable for interracial cooperation. This cooperation, however, was of a kind that did not attract public attention for the reason that it was not organized and was for the most part of individuals with individuals and for religious, economic, and educational purposes. The present inter-racial movement is organized and has specific stated ends for which it is working. These ends are in a general way to secure social justice, a square deal for the Negro, and to bring about the cooperation of whites with Negroes for the best interest of the South and of the nation.

### The Race Problem No Longer Sectional But National

The race problem in the United States is no longer sectional. It has always been national in that it concerned the whole nation; but so long as there were comparatively few Negroes in the North and the problem in its acuteness was in the South, it was thought of as being sectional. It was on this ground that the statement was often made that the South should be permitted to handle the problem in its own way. The recent migration of the Negro has made the problem in its acuteness a national one. It should be considered, not as a problem of the Negro in the South or the Negro in the North, but as a problem of the nation.

### World Contacts

The Negro groups of the world by means of the World War came into strikingly influencing contact with each other. This contact has been strengthened and continued through the perfecting of world methods of communication and the general diffusion of knowledge concerning what is going on in every part of the world. The Negroes by means of the literature which they have developed in America, in Africa, in the West Indies, and through the general literature of the world have continued this contact. The Negroes in America know what the Negroes in Africa and in the West Indies are thinking. The Pan-African Movement and the so-called Garvey Movement are the direct results of this contact through communication which the Negroes in different parts of the world have established. It is probable that it will be very difficult for the prob46lem of the Negro in America, the problem of the Negro in the West Indies, and the problem of the Negro in Africa to be handled as one universal problem to the Negro. These groups, however, may be able to give moral and other support to each other.

### Progress and the Race Problem

It is sometimes stated that the progress of the Negro will be a solution of the race problem. The facts, however, indicate that progress, instead of being a solution of the problem, may sometimes intensify, complicate, and make it more difficult. The Negro by reason of his making progress along all lines is coming into contact with the white group in many and varied ways. This contact has two tendencies; one favorable, one unfavorable. One tends to increase friction, the other to promote more friendly relations. An important part of the adjusting of the race problem is to reduce friction and to bring about more friendly relations, more interracial cooperation.

### Progress is Making the Negro a More Assimilable Group

During the days of slavery through the house servant and mechanic, the free Negro class and in other ways the Negro group was in contact with the best culture of the South. Since emancipation through northern education the Negro, as a group, has been in touch with the best culture and traditions of the North. The Negroes of America, as a group, have no traditions binding them to another country or another culture. They have no heritages in the sense that the foreign elements of the country have. No part of the Negro group is advocating that the group should not acquire the culture of the nation; on the other hand, the whole effort of the group is to foster the ideals of America and to make progress not only as Negroes but as Americans.

*This article in large part appeared in the Journal of Social Forces for January, 1924, and is carried in this magazine with several important corrections and additions.*

1. The census estimate of omissions of Negroes in Southern States in census count of 1870 is 512,000. See Vol. II., p. 15, of 1920 census report.[↩︎](#fnref1)

1. Census reports the number of mulattoes in 1920 as being 1,660,554, or 390,132 less than, the number, 2,050,686, for 1910. Some probable causes for this apparent decrease are (1) as already noted above, many Negroes were probably not enumerated in 1920; (2) many mulattoes of dark complexion were returned as blacks; (3) many mulattoes of very light complexion were returned as “whites.”[↩︎](#fnref2)