

THE NEGRO PROBLEM FROM THE NEGRO POINT OF VIEW

I. THE TUSKEGEE IDEA

BY

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THE editor asks me to discuss some of the guiding principles of Tuskegee's endeavor and I shall attempt to indicate one, namely, that Tuskegee adjusts itself helpfully to social conditions.

Let us first glance at the social conditions and see what they demand. It is well known that nine-tenths of the Negro people live and labor in the southern states, and that they are, despite the increasing resort to cities, an agricultural population. There are, of course, Negro farmers in the northern states and the contrast between these farmers and their more numerous brethren of the South is instructive. The census of 1900 shows in the north Atlantic states that 65.3 per cent of the farms of colored farmers were operated by owners, as against 29.4 per cent in the south Atlantic, a difference in favor of the northern farmers of 122 per cent; the corresponding figures for the north central states, as compared with the south central, are 56.9 per cent, as against 21.4 per cent, a difference in favor of the northern farmers of 166 per cent. What accounts for this difference between the Negro farmers of the North and the Negro farmers of the South? An obvious answer is that in the North the Negro farmers are, with some exceptions, scattered among thrifty, enterprising, white farmers; mere example is a powerful incentive.

Moreover, this remark is reinforced if we compare similar statistics for the fifteen counties with the largest percentage of Negro farmers in each of seven southern states with the fifteen counties in each of the same states with the smallest per-

centage. I refer to the States of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas. Fifteen and two-tenths per cent of the Negro farmers in the black counties were owners, as against 23.5 per cent in the white counties, a superiority in ownership for the Negroes of the white counties of 55 per cent. No doubt one cause of this difference is that the value of land is greater in the black counties; the Negro population seeks the rich alluvial soil as inevitably as water seeks its level; land in these fertile regions commands a higher price than land in the hill counties and the buying of land is more difficult. However, the census report rightly emphasizes the fundamental cause. "The industrial experience of the two races . . . justifies the conclusion that an industrial separation of the two races and the segregation of the Negroes in the South or North inures to the benefit of neither race. The Negro, at least, makes the better progress the more closely he is associated with the white man, and the more he is enabled to see in the example of the white man an incentive for becoming a landowner. Take away the example by segregating the colored man from the white, as in the black belt of the South, repeat Haiti in a lesser degree, and some of the Haitian conditions are produced. Under such conditions the progress of the colored man is slower, and the white man, as well as the Negro, fails to realize the benefits of an improved industrial order."

Under the circumstances it becomes interesting and important to inquire to what extent the movement of population in the South has in fact approximated Haiti. It

is well known that, as the years go by, black counties get blacker and white counties whiter, but the actual situation already produced by this tendency is not so well known. Hale County, Alabama, is roughly representative. There are in this county 5,664 whites and 25,347 Negroes; of the population over ten years of age 436 whites and 10,347 Negroes are illiterate. Of course, Hale is a farming county and 75.7 per cent of the farms are operated by Negroes. Of the 2,881 farms operated by Negroes only 283 are operated by Negroes who own the land and 158 by Negro part owners, 2,231 by cash tenants, and 204 by share tenants. Very plainly the Negroes of Hale County are chiefly agricultural laborers and farmers, a select few being owners. The Negro farmer looks upon the soil as a mine rather than a laboratory and accordingly he takes out but does not put in. Planting the same crop in the same soil year after year, using implements of ridiculous antiquity, leaving every operation to the very last moment and conducting it then in the crudest way, with the last spark of hope almost trampled upon by the merciless crop-lien system, the average Negro farmer in the black belt is in a miserable plight. Of the moral status of the rural Negro, as judged by the American standard, I have not the heart to speak. However, a superior class is emerging from the darkness and in them lies the hope of the race. Such is the quality of the black belt.

What is its extent? From Baton Rouge to points north of Memphis is a broad belt, many miles in average width, bordering the Mississippi, but chiefly to the east of the river, in each county of which the proportion of the Negro population to the total is sixty per cent and over. Similarly from east central Mississippi another such belt starts and goes through Alabama and Georgia and South Carolina to the ocean; in this second belt Tuskegee is located. In Alabama there are fifteen counties in each of which the Negro population is sixty per cent or more of the total population; and in the black belt constituted by these counties the Negro population is more than seventy-seven per cent of the total population. And the black counties get blacker each year!

Now, the social regeneration of such black belts is of the utmost importance to the well-being of millions of Negroes, to the economic development of the South, and the quality of American civilization. Reflective men can not look upon the darkened lives of these black men without wishing to come to their aid. America's passion for the utilization of every natural resource can not look without concern upon the fact that vast and fertile regions in the South yield but a tithe of their product because of the industrial inefficiency of the population. No American wishes Haitian conditions approximated in Alabama, and Georgia, and Mississippi, and South Carolina. The social and industrial regeneration of these black belts is, then, of the utmost moment.

Some newspapers have been trying to solicit white immigrants, but such immigrants do not, as a fact, come. Indeed, the whites already in the black counties are moving out and their places are taken by Negroes. Must we not let down our buckets where we are? Must we not accept the black belts as actual and utilize every resource for their social and industrial regeneration? I believe that this is the policy that not our inclinations but the facts simply force upon us.

Accepting this proposition, what is the best means for achieving the end? Education undoubtedly, the rational education of the sons and daughters of these black men. Teachers and teachers of teachers are needed, for these people are ignorant; preachers are needed to supply sanctions for moral conduct; doctors are needed to battle with disease. But we must remember that civilization rests upon economic foundations; industrial efficiency must gradually be developed in these black men. During my recent visit to France I had the honor of conversing at length with many cultured Haitians and I was gratified to see them grant that Haiti's fundamental error was in cultivating literary to the exclusion of industrial education; the Haitians are engaged in revolution because they are not engaged in labor. And I believe with a faith which the years increase that the regeneration of the black counties of the South must be fundamentally industrial. If it is true that the black farmer in Kansas is better off than the black farmer

in Mississippi because the Kansas Negro finds before him, day after day, many examples of thrift and enterprise, whereas, the Mississippi Negro is thriftless among the thriftless; and if it is true that the white farmers won't leave Kansas to serve as object lessons in Mississippi, then it is mere common sense to distribute throughout the black belts of the South many black men and women whose lives and labors will prove powerful incentives toward good character and industrial efficiency. And this Tuskegee has been doing for twenty-two years.

The central idea in our work at Tuskegee is that there should be a vital connection between the school and society. Tuskegee does not recruit, so far as I know, the army of those who can locate on the map the Alps or the Andes with precision, but who have no idea of the proper location of the various knives, forks and dishes upon the dinner table. Perhaps I can express what I mean by referring to an incident which saddened me very much. I was once a visitor to the commencement exercises of a Negro "university" in the South, and there I listened to the disquisitions of students who had just been admitted to the fellowship of educated men and women, or, more accurately, had just received A.Bs. One of the students had chosen for a subject, "The Genius of Shakespeare," and she showered imperial Shakespeare with much eloquence. On inquiry I found that most of this young lady's time at the school had been spent in the study of Latin and Greek; she had, I recall, a course in logic but no course in dress-making, a course in trigonometry but no course in housekeeping. This student, I found, came from a log cabin on the outskirts of a sleepy little town in Alabama, where her surroundings were the most wretched. I felt a wondering admiration for the ambition and pluck that led her so many miles away to the "university," but I was saddened to think that her education had probably not brought her into the most helpful relation to her surroundings. I do not mean that her reading of Cicero and Homer did not give her ideals and incentives, I do not mean that her study of trigonometry did not train her to think straight, I do not mean that she is not prepared for usefulness as a

teacher, but I do mean that the university would have rendered her and her community infinitely greater service, would have made her a much more useful teacher, if it had given her, in addition to ideals and mental discipline, a quickened interest in her surroundings and such ability in cooking and sewing and housekeeping and nursing and gardening, as are needed to make her father's cabin a home and an object lesson, and are needed by the many little girls she will teach. I am glad to say that a great many of our schools and colleges here in the South do not follow the example of this university in keeping their instruction severely aloof from real life. At any rate Tuskegee has endeavored for twenty-two years to maintain a vital relation between its instruction and the actualities of the life from which its students come, thus making its students efficient instruments of social regeneration.

More definitely, let me say that Tuskegee emphasizes the teaching of agriculture. Although the school is now in its constructive period and hence much student labor is needed in the building trades, we had last year 467 pupils engaged in agriculture: 181 students were engaged in the actual operation of the farm, the truckfarm, the orchard, etc.; 79 students were taking "the professional courses" in agriculture, and 207 were taking agriculture as a regular part of their academic work. This statement has eliminated the counting of the same person twice. To be sure, many of our students farm a part of the year and teach a part, but in such cases they serve not only as object lessons, but as instruments for diffusing, in the widest possible way, the agricultural teaching of Tuskegee, for most of them teach gardening and the elements of improved agriculture as well as the three Rs. And in this way the school aims with the utmost precision at the social and industrial regeneration of the black belts.

Soon after the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute was established, I was impressed with the idea that much good might be accomplished by some movement which would interest the older people and inspire them to work for their own elevation. I first came to think of this when I had occasion to notice re-

peatedly the unusual amount of common sense displayed by what is termed the ignorant colored man of the South. At first I sent invitations to about seventy-five farmers, mechanics, school teachers and ministers to come and spend a day at Tuskegee, talking over their condition and needs. I was very careful to tell all who were invited to come that I did not want them to come with cut-and-dried speeches; they were to come and talk about their conditions and needs very much as they would do around their own firesides. To my surprise, there came to this first conference 400 men and women of all grades and conditions. The bulk of the people were farmers and mechanics, with a scattering of teachers and ministers. The morning of the day was spent in telling in a plain and simple manner what the industrial conditions were. We had each delegate, as far as he could, tell the number of men in his community who owned their farms, the number who rented land, the number who lived in one-room log cabins, and the number who mortgaged their crops. We also had the delegates tell about the educational conditions in their communities. We gave attention to the moral and religious life of the community, and had them tell what species of ministers they had. From the very first we have been surprised at the frankness and directness of these reports. In the afternoon we heard from these same people what, in their opinion, would

bring about remedies for the evils which they had described. It was very encouraging to see how clearly the people realized their own condition, and how often they were able to suggest the needed remedies. It was found that in what is known as the "black belt" of the South, at least four-fifths of the Negro people in many counties were living in one-room cabins, on rented land, were mortgaging their crops for food on which to live, and were paying a rate of interest on those mortgages which ranged from fifteen to forty per cent per annum. The schools, in most cases, extended but three months, and were taught, as a rule, in the churches, in broken-down log cabins or in brush arbors. From year to year the attendance at the conference has increased; last year there were at least two thousand delegates.

Certainly not the least important result of each conference is in quickening the interest and informed sympathy of our regular students in the black belt people. There may be cases where our students do not make the best of farmers, but certainly the cases where they do not make men and women of sound character and aroused social conscience are fewer.

In a rough, hurried way I have sought to indicate a fundamental principle of Tuskegee's endeavor, namely, to use the curriculum and the influence of the school explicitly as instruments of social and industrial regeneration.

The World To-Day

VOLUME VI.

APRIL, 1904.

NUMBER 4
