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THE RURAL SOUTH.*

By W. E. B. DuBois, Ph.D., *Editor of the Crisis Magazine.*

One may readily admit most of the favorable signs of advance in the rural South and yet see grave causes for disquietude. Contrary to the unfaltering and reiterated statements of many people that the Negro is too lazy and inefficient to work steadily or to save, every succeeding census gives more and more unanswerable evidence that the accumulation of landed property in the hands of black folk is increasing with great rapidity in the face of great difficulties. The figures at present obtainable indicate that between 1890 and 1910 the Negro farm owners increased nearly 90 per cent., and that the value of their holdings in that same period has considerably more than doubled. If we leave out of account all Negroes in the South except those who own land, we find that these alone have become an economic force that must be reckoned with. In South Carolina, for instance, not only are most of the farms run by Negroes but 25 per cent. of the actual owners are black.

Now, it is full easy in the face of these encouraging, or, to some, discouraging, facts, to adopt the complacent and even congratulatory tone evidenced in this discussion tonight. With peculiarly American philosophy, we seem to say, as we have in the past so often said, all is well because we are making money and making it fast.

It seems to me, however, that if there ever was a time or a place where it was the duty of an organization like this to sound a note of sharp warning, it is in the face of the present situation in the rural South.

In the midst of a whirling rush of economic development for the last twenty years, which is astonishing even according to American standards, any student of economics knows that the South of today is committing nearly every economic heresy which the whole history of modern industrial development warns nations to avoid and warns them forcibly, and even passionately.

*Paper read at the joint meeting of the American Economic Association and the American Statistical Association, Washington, D. C., December 28, 1911.

What are the things that modern industry has learned to insist upon? They are, I take it: (1) The personal freedom of the laborer; (2) the education of the masses; (3) the equality of employer and employee before the law; (4) the impartiality of the courts; and (5) the right of the governed to share in their own government.

In the South, and particularly in the rural South, every one of these fundamental postulates is being violated, and not only violated, but on those violations there is being built a philosophy of industry and life which is self-contradictory and fatal to the development of the broad principles of industrial democracy. I have great sympathy with those amiable souls, who, knowing this to be true, believe that present policy demands silence or even glossing over the plain facts. I say I have sympathy with such folk, but I am compelled to remember that in the great past the inexorable decrees of truth have held as strongly against the flatterer and the so-called optimist as against the pessimist and the liar.

Every one is, of course, aware that the reason that the South is building industry so largely on compulsory labor, ignorance, discrimination in the courts, lack of organized justice, and disfranchisement is because these weapons are excused by the Negro problem. Permit me to remind the supporters of this argument of two things: first, if they are relying on these ancient and mediæval weapons to keep all Negroes down, the figures presented here show how futile their efforts are; second, if they think that the black man is the only sufferer under this policy, they are destined to add to the future an industrial error far greater than that of the past.

To illustrate this, let me point out that the practice of peonage in the rural South where not less than a quarter of a million black laborers are held to service on plantations by force in direct defiance of laws and wise industrial policy has been buttressed by a system of statutes and administration which applies to all rural labor, black and white, and which makes a body of legislation positively astonishing in its reactionary and mediæval aspect. The contract labor laws, the vagrancy laws, the permissible debt manipulation by book accounts, and the discredited "company stores system"

make a body of law which carries force and fraud on its very face and which covers a large part of the rural South. Where else in a modern industrial land could a girl of fourteen, accused by the landlord's bookkeeping of receiving an advance wage of \$7 and of refusing to carry out farther her contract to pick cotton, be fined \$75 or twelve months in the chain gang? Yet this is precisely the case that is today before the courts of Georgia, and this is the kind of victim that is being educated in crime all over the South. In every modern industrial system either the laborer has his unfinished product to dispose of, or if the capitalist retains it, the laborer is given a quit-claim in wages, which money is absolutely his. Yet in the rural South such wages are characterized as money "advanced" to the laborer, he is charged high interest on it, and the transaction is made the basis of a contract which not only puts the unfinished product under the control of the undertaker, but which in many cases even makes the laborer liable to criminal prosecution if he leaves his job and makes the capitalist the sole judge as to whether the contract is kept. To prove this I have merely to quote from a printed farm land lease published by the Brown Printing Company of Montgomery, Alabama.*

Said tenant further agrees that until the rent, and advancements, if any, are paid to the owner, to have all the cotton made on the premises during the term of this lease ginned at any ginnery or stored at any place in said county the owner may designate, and to turn over to the owner the receipts for each sale, to hold until paid.

Said tenant further agrees that if he violates the contract, or neglects, or abandons or fails (or *in the owner's judgment* violates this contract or fails) to properly work or cultivate the land early or at proper times, or in case he should become physically or legally incapacitated from working said lands or should die during the term of his lease, or fails to gather or save the crops when made, or fails to pay the rents or advances made by the owner, when due, then in case of any such failures, the owner is hereby authorized to take *full* possession of said premises, crops and improvements, in which event this contract may become void and cancelled at the *owner's option*, and all indebtedness by the tenant for

*Italics are mine.

advances or rent shall at once become due and payable to the owner who may treat them as due and payable without further notice to the tenant; and the tenant hereby agrees to surrender the quiet and peaceable possession of said premises to the owner at said time, in which event the owner is hereby authorized to transfer, sell or dispose of *all property thereon the tenant has any interest in*, and in order to entitle the owner to do so, it shall *not be necessary* to give any notice of any failure or violation of this contract by the tenant, the execution of this lease being sufficient notice of default on the part of the tenant, and shall be so construed between the parties hereto, *any law, usage or custom to the contrary notwithstanding.*

This is by no means the worst form of farm contract daily enforced in the rural South. The successful carrying through of legislation and administration such as this, depends, of course, largely on ignorance on the part of the laborers.

I have followed with interest the campaign against ignorance in the South. Private sources have done much for the Negro in the past and public means are greatly forwarding white education in the present. Whatever efforts decrease the ignorance of either group are for the direct good of all. But let us not hasten too quickly to congratulate ourselves that the rural South has adopted a policy of universal intelligence. On the contrary, the Negro of the United States never had and has not now any common school system in the South by which the majority of his boys and girls could learn to read and write.

Today, fifty years after emancipation, only 37 per cent. of the Negro school population of the South is in school attendance and most of these are in the cities and towns. In the rural South today not one black child in four is in school and those in school are there, for the most part, but a few months in the year. The public school system for Negroes in the rural South is worse today than it was twenty years ago, with a smaller percentage of enrollment and a smaller proportion of teachers; and this is true despite local exceptions and laudable personal efforts.

Not only is there this deliberate attempt to keep the country Negro ignorant, but he is largely deprived of voice in his

own government or protection. Sixteen years ago in Lowndes County, Ala., there was scarcely a Negro landowner. The reason, of course, was that black folk were too shiftless. Two Northern women started not only a school, but a land buying scheme. As a result the colored settlers round about have bought 4,000 acres and paid \$26,793 cash for the land. Also 630 additional acres are being bought, for which \$2,023 has been paid and \$6,165 has been paid as rent on the farm by people who did not purchase. In addition to this, \$6,582 has been paid for new homes, making a grand total of \$41,563 since 1895. Despite this, in this picture there is but one appalling menace.

In 1906, when I visited that county, not a single one of these fifty or more thrifty, striving men had been allowed to register and vote under the new disfranchising law, and even the Hampton graduate who directed the details of the land scheme had been disfranchised with the rest.