

THE RACE QUESTIONS

There is literally a multitude of myths and dogmas which purport to explain racial differences. They range from biblical explanations to zoological classifications. As one explanation loses its novelty or its power to convince, another emerges. The persistence of race theorists is astonishing. Why do they go to such lengths to find proof for what they obviously take for granted? The concept of race resists precise definition. All the same, the layman knows perfectly well that there are certain major human groups that differ noticeably from each other — even though there are also noticeable differences between members of any one of these groups.

Racism begins with the attempt to attach values to real or imaginary differences, and the attempt plumbs the depth of absurdity when it produces statements like these: 'Races which are hairy are inferior to and less

human than those which are free from body hair; thick lips are more human than thin lips because apes have thin lips; straight, lank, or wavy hair is more simian than woolly hair'. Where does this kind of analysis take us — if it can be honour with the name? Exactly nowhere. Simian features appear to have been distributed among the races with a fine impartiality.

What race theorists fail to establish on the basis of measurable physical differences, they try to explain in terms of inherent psychological differences. But this is tricky ground too, for people's reactions to psychological tests are very much affected by socio-economic conditions, and by acquired habits and skills which are hard to associate from innate ability. For instance, it has been established that there are no completely culture-free or language-free psychological tests.

In everyday terms we speak of people as being of 'English blood', 'German blood', 'Negro blood'. We speak of one as 'pure-blooded', of another we say that he is 'half-breed' or 'half-caste', or one-eighth this or one-sixteenth that. It sounds very precise to say that if one of the sixteen direct ancestors of a person — that is, a great-great-grandparent — belongs to a particular race, then he is one-sixteenth a member of that race. In Brazil there are special names for different racial mixtures — white-African mixture is a 'mulato'; an Indian-Portuguese mixture is a 'caboclo'; an Indian-African mixture is a 'cafuso'. But genetically a man cannot be described as if he were a cocktail or an omelette! Anyway, if these 'recipes' have any value as descriptions of people's physical types they are useless in cases where members of the same family — brothers and sisters, even — have totally different complexions and physical characteristics, to the point where some are regarded and treated as Negroes and others pass for whites.

Race relations are rooted

in accumulated experiences and memories of the past, in frustrations and grievances of the present; these are the things which determine the mood in which peoples meet, that give birth to preconceptions and attitudes which get in the way of mutual understanding. Dr. Albert Schweitzer surprised us when he said: 'My general rule is never to trust a black'. A Gold Coast statesman, Nana Sir Ofori Atta, said in the Legislative Council in 1939: 'Whiteman is a whiteman, he will not leave his brother whiteman and support you. Do you think the Government will support you, black man?' A former Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia is reported to have said: 'Africans, until they are very much advanced, are all liars'.

And then there are the dogmas. A Governor of Mississippi is reported to have said: 'The Negro is singularly tractable and amenable to control by his well-recognized superior. For this reason the Egyptian, the Roman, and the Turk paid higher prices for them than for other slaves'. Needless to say, this seemingly scholarly

pronouncement has no basis in fact. But the Governor is not alone in his illusion. The late Field-Marshal Smuts, addressing an audience in New York, once remarked: 'Apart from the donkey, the Negro is the most patient of God's creatures'. Questioned about this, the Field-Marshal answered that he was praising the virtues of Negroes, and that his remark had not been intended to be an insult!

It is not generally realized that Negro resistance to slavery never ceased. Independent and purposeful slaves on American plantations were usually 'sold down the river', as the expression was, to harsher and more ruthless masters. Captured runaway slaves and insurrectionists were quartered or broken on the wheel. Haiti became independent as a result of a rebellion of its slaves. Fugitives from slavery formed independent settlements in Guiana, where they became the 'Bush Negroes', and in Jamaica, where they were named the 'Maroons'. Among the early settlers in Freetown, Sierra Leone, were rebellious Negroes who had

been specially selected for repatriation. There is no shortage of evidence to show that the Negro worked relentlessly to emancipate himself and to regain his status as a man.

Apart from resisting slavery, Negroes developed a group consciousness which provided a basis for a kind of black nationalism. The white man's religion and civilization — everything white — was regarded as part of an arrangement to enslave and humiliate the black man. There have been two trends in black nationalism, represented by two anti-slavery agitators, Delany and Frederick Douglass. Douglass's school of thought sought to secure the rights of the Negro in a multi-racial society, and it is carried on in the policy of the present-day Civil Rights movement. Delany's attitude finds expression in the Black Zionist movement of the 'twenties, which was led by Marcus Garvey, and in the Black Muslim movement of Elijah Muhammed and Malcolm X, whose aim is to build a Negro society in isolation.

In his study of the race question, *An American Di-*

lemma, the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal established what he termed a 'rank order of discrimination'. This is a set of topics about which upholders and victims of racial discrimination feel most strongly. Myrdal lists them from the point of view of white Americans in descending order of intensity. Marriage and sexual relations rank the highest, followed by conventions intended to deny social equality; then there is segregation in the use of public facilities; next comes political disenfranchisement; then comes discrimination in law courts and by law-enforcement officers; and at the bottom of the list are restrictions on the ability to purchase land, secure credit, and obtain employment.

Myrdal notes that 'the Negro's rank order is just about parallel, but inverse, to that of the white man'. In other words, the complaints which were at the bottom of the white man's list — jobs, education, housing, political rights and just treatment by the courts and law-enforcing authorities — are at the top of the Negro's

list. The same pattern appeared in what were called 'the African Claims' which were adopted in 1945 by the National Congress of South Africa, some of whose activities I have mentioned. In short, the most pressing disabilities are economic. Poverty, social debasement, and lack of political influence expose the deprived sections of a community to abuse, exploitation, and injustice. An improvement in economic status could lead to fuller public acceptance and to equality before law; but the lack of these social rights makes economic improvement impossible.

To return to my categories of fear: the intensity of feeling about inter-marriage, which came first on the white man's list, is closely linked with the fear of miscegenation. It is an aspect of most caste and class systems. The rule has been for the male members of the dominant races to take women of the subject or conquered peoples, and where there has been ethnic domination most persons of mixed ancestry have for their fathers or grandfathers members not of the sub-

ject group but of the ruling group. The contemporary male member of what used to be the ruling races has inherited a sense of guilt which grossly exaggerates his fear of the reverse process — of the formerly subordinate group becoming sexually dominant. And unscrupulous politicians and racial psychopaths exploit this fear.

Richard Wright once made the defenders of 'racial purity' an offer: he suggested that an inter-racial covenant should be signed which would guarantee that: 'The white man's eyes shall remain forever blue, his skin forever white, and his hair forever blond, provided that he does not continue to presume that the natural resources of the world belong to him and that all other peoples are means placed at his disposal merely because his eyes are blue'.

The peoples of the world are trapped in a vicious circle composed of notions of superiority and inferiority, of suspicion, misconceptions, preconceptions, frustrations,

and insecurity. Above all there is fear. It is fear that sets the racial moods, and if we are to break the vicious circle we must concentrate our assault upon these racial fears in all their forms. Hatred and intolerance are not innate in peoples; they are the children of fear, as fear is the child of ignorance.

Ultimately, what racial minorities seek is not anybody's to give. The dominant races will not be any poorer by recognizing the rights that are now denied to much of the world. When this fact is appreciated in all its significance, our moods will change. And change they must, because the solution to our problem is to be found in a society of free men. There is all the difference in the world between 'free' and 'freed' men. Nobody is being required to free anybody. A world of peoples will consist of societies in which men are free.

No one can give equality; all that can be shared is respect. — *Robert Gardiner, Home Service of the BBC.*