

# THE PATHOLOGY OF RACE PREJUDICE

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"The Negro-in-America, therefore, is a form of insanity that overtakes white men." — *The Southerner*, by Walter Hines Page.

*THE attitude of races to one another has given rise to much speculation, and many writers have maintained that men do not differ greatly from ants in their antipathies. Race hatred is so strong among ants that their battles can be arranged with certainty by entomologists for the movies. A more flattering view of human prejudices is here suggested; for if they are chiefly due to psychopathology there is hope that with the progress of science a somewhat more rational attitude may eventually prevail.*

**A**LTHOUGH the statement above makes no claim to technical exactness, it is nevertheless confirmed by modern studies of insanity. If, in developing this thesis, we consider some of the newer conceptions of mental processes as they apply to abnormal behavior, we shall find in each case that the behavior motivated by race prejudice shows precisely the same characteristics as that ascribed to insanity.

This does not refer, of course, to those phenomena of insanity due to abnormalities of the actual structure of the brain, nor does it refer to the changes that come in dementia. We are concerned here chiefly with the psychological approach to the problem of insanity, — for race prejudice is an acquired psychological reaction, and there is no scientific evidence that it represents the functioning of inherited behavior patterns. Even from a practical viewpoint, as we shall attempt to show, we are forced to regard certain manifestations of race prejudice as abnormal behavior.

The conception used to explain abnormal behavior which we shall consider first is dissociation of consciousness. Normally, the mental life appears to be a "homogeneous stream progressing in a definite direction toward a single end", as Dr. Hart puts it. That this apparent homogeneity is deceptive, even in normal minds, is shown by a little observation. Every one has had the experience of performing a task while engaged in an unrelated train of thought. In cases such as this the dissociation is temporary and incomplete, while in insanity the dissociation is relatively permanent and complete. Automatic writing in cases of

hysteria, somnambulism, dual personality, and delusions are cases of the splitting off of whole systems of ideas. The conclusion of Hart that "this dissociation of the mind into logic-tight compartments is by no means confined to the population of the asylum" will lead us to those manifestations of race prejudice that show the same marked mental dissociation found in the insane. Herbert Seligman, in his book on the Negro, suggests the insane nature of Southern reactions to the blacks when he says, "The Southern white man puts certain questions beyond discussion. If they are pressed he will fight rather than argue." Southern white people write and talk about the majesty of law, the sacredness of human rights, and the advantages of democracy, — and the next moment defend mob violence, disfranchisement, and Jim Crow treatment of the Negro. White men and women who are otherwise kind and law-abiding will indulge in the most revolting forms of cruelty towards black people. Thus the whole system of ideas respecting the Negro is dissociated from the normal personality and, — what is more significant for our thesis, — this latter system of ideas seems exempt from the control of the personality.

These dissociated systems of ideas generally have a strong emotional component and are known as complexes. The Negro-complex, — the designation which we shall give the system of ideas which most Southerners have respecting the Negro, — has the same intense emotional tone that characterizes insane complexes. The prominence of the exaggerated emotional element has been noted by Josiah Royce in contrasting with the American attitude the attitude of the English in the West Indies, who are "wholly without those painful emotions, those insistent complaints and anxieties, which are so prominent in the minds of our own Southern brethren." Moreover, just as in the insane any pertinent stimulus may arouse the whole complex, so any idea connected with the Negro causes the whole Negro-complex to be projected into consciousness. Its presence there means that all thinking is determined by the complex. For example, a white woman who addresses a colored man as mister is immediately asked whether she would want a Negro to marry her sister and must listen to a catalog of his sins. How else than as the somnambulism of the insane and almost insane are we to account for

the behavior of a member of a school board who jumps up and paces the floor, cursing and accusing Negroes, the instant the question of appropriating money for Negro schools is raised? Likewise, the Negro-complex obtrudes itself on all planes of thought. Health programs are slighted because it is argued Negroes will increase; the selective draft is opposed because the Negro will be armed; woman suffrage is fought because colored women will vote. In many other cases the behavior of white people toward life in general is less consciously and less overtly influenced by the Negro-complex. Bitter memories quite often furnish its emotional basis while the complex itself is elaborated by ideas received from the social environment.

There is a mistaken notion, current among most people, that the insane are irrational, that their reasoning processes are in themselves different from those of normal people. The insane support their delusions by the same mechanism of rationalization that normal people employ to support beliefs having a non-rational origin. The delusions of the insane, however, show a greater imperviousness to objective fact. The delusions of the white man under the influence of the Negro-complex show the same imperviousness to objective facts concerning the Negro. We have heard lately an intelligent Southern white woman insisting that nine-tenths of all Negroes have syphilis, in spite of statistical and other authoritative evidence to the contrary. Moreover, just as the lunatic seizes upon every fact to support his delusional system, the white man seizes myths and unfounded rumors to support his delusion about the Negro. When the lunatic is met with ideas incompatible with his delusion he distorts facts by rationalization to preserve the inner consistency of his delusions. Of a similar nature is the argument of the white man who declares that white blood is responsible for character and genius in mixed Negroes and at the same time that white blood harms the Negroes! Pro-slavery literature denying the humanity of the Negro, as well as contemporary Southern opinion supporting lynching and oppression, utilizes the mechanism of rationalization to support delusions.

Race prejudice involves the mental conflict, which is held to be the cause of the dissociation of ideas so prominent in insanity. The Negro-complex is often out of harmony with the personality

as a whole and therefore results in a conflict that involves unpleasant emotional tension. In everyday life such conflicts are often solved by what, — in those following contradictory moral codes, — is generally known as hypocrisy. When, however, the two systems of incompatible ideas cannot be kept from conflict, the insane man reconciles them through the process of rationalization. Through this same process of rationalization, the Southern white man creates defenses for his immoral acts, and lynching becomes a holy defense of womanhood. That the alleged reasons for violence are simply defense mechanisms for unacceptable wishes is shown by a case in which a juror was lynched for voting to exonerate a Negro accused of a crime! The energetic measures which Southerners use to prevent legal unions of white with colored people look suspiciously like compensatory reactions for their own frustrated desires for such unions. Other forms of defense mechanisms appear in the Southerner's sentimentalizing over his love for the Negro and the tendency in the South to joke about him, — which has a close parallel in the humor of the alcoholic. At the basis of these unacceptable ideas, requiring rationalizations and other forms of defense mechanisms to bring them into harmony with the personality, we find fear, hatred, and sadism constantly cropping out.

When one surveys Southern literature dealing with the Negro, one finds him accused of all the failings of mankind. When we reflect, however, that the Negro, in spite of his ignorance and poverty, does not in most places contribute more than his share to crime and, — even in the opinion of his most violent disparagers, — possesses certain admirable qualities, we are forced to seek the cause of these excessive accusations in the minds of the accusers themselves. Here, too, we find striking similarities to the mental processes of the insane. Where the conflict between the personality as a whole and the unacceptable complex is not resolved within the mind of the subject, the extremely repugnant system of dissociated ideas is projected upon some real or imaginary individual. Except in the case of those who, as we have seen, charge the Negro with an inherent impulse to rape as an unconscious defense of their own murderous impulses, the persistence, — in the face of contrary evidence, — of the delusion that the Negro is a ravisher can only be taken as a projection.

According to this view, the Southern white man, who has, — arbitrarily without censure, — enjoyed the right to use colored women, projects this insistent desire upon the Negro when it is no longer socially approved and his conscious personality likewise rejects it. Like the lunatic, he refuses to treat the repugnant desire as a part of himself and consequently shows an exaggerated antagonism toward the desire which he projects upon the Negro. A case has come to the attention of the writer which shows clearly the projection of the unacceptable wish. A telephone operator in a small Southern city called up a Negro doctor and told him that some one at his home had made an improper proposal to her. Although the physician protested that the message could not have come from his house the sheriff was sent to arrest him. His record in the town had been conspicuously in accord with the white man's rule about the color line. He had consistently refused to attend white men, not to mention white women, who had applied to him for treatment. Unable, in spite of his record, to escape arrest, he sought the aid of a white physician. The whole matter died down suddenly, the white physician explaining to his colored colleague that he had gone to the operator and found that she was only "nervous" that day. To those who are acquainted with the mechanism of projection, such a word as "nervous" here has a deeper significance.

The mechanism of projection is also seen in the general disposition of Southern white men to ascribe an inordinate amount of fear to Negroes. That the Negro has no monopoly of fear was admirably demonstrated in Atlanta, where, a year or so ago, white people were fleeing from a haunted road while Negroes were coolly robbing graveyards! This same mental process would explain why white men constantly lay crimes to Negroes when there is no evidence whatever to indicate the race of the criminal. Can we not find here also an explanation of the unwarranted anxiety which white men feel for their homes because of the Negro? Is this another projection of their own unacceptable complexes? In the South, the white man is certainly a greater menace to the Negro's home than the latter is to his.

We must include in our discussion two more aspects of the behavior of the insane that find close parallels in the behavior of those under the influence of the Negro-complex. We meet in the

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insane with a tendency on the part of the patient to interpret everything that happens in his environment in terms of his particular delusion. In the case of those suffering from the Negro-complex we see the same tendency at work. Any recognition accorded the Negro, even in the North, is regarded as an attempt to give him "social equality", the personal connotations of which are familiar to most Americans. In the South, Negroes have been lynched for being suspected of such a belief. Misconstructions such as are implied in the Southern conception of social equality are so manifestly absurd that they bear a close resemblance to the delusions of reference in the insane. Perhaps more justly to be classed as symptoms of insanity are those frequent hallucinations of white women who complain of attacks by Negroes when clearly no Negroes are involved. Hallucinations often represent unacceptable sexual desires which are projected when they can no longer be repressed. In the South a desire on the part of a white woman for a Negro that could no longer be repressed would most likely be projected, — especially when such a desire is supposed to be as horrible as incest. It is not unlikely, therefore, that imaginary attacks by Negroes are often projected wishes.

The following manifestation of race prejudice shows strikingly its pathological nature. Some years ago a mulatto went to a small Southern town to establish a school for Negroes. In order not to become *persona non grata* in the community, he approached the leading white residents for their approval of the enterprise. Upon his visit to one white woman he was invited into her parlor and treated with the usual courtesies shown visitors; but when this woman discovered later that he was colored, she chopped up the chair in which he had sat and, after pouring gasoline over the pieces, made a bonfire of them. The pathological nature of a delusion is shown by its being out of harmony with one's education and surroundings. For an Australian black fellow to show terror when he learns his wife has touched his blanket would not evince a pathological state of mind; whereas, it did indicate a pathological mental state for this woman to act as if some mysterious principle had entered the chair.

From a practical viewpoint, insanity means social incapacity. Southern white people afflicted with the Negro-complex show



themselves incapable of performing certain social functions. They are, for instance, incapable of rendering just decisions when white and colored people are involved; and their very claim that they "know" and "understand" the Negro indicates a fixed system of ideas respecting him, — whereas a sane and just appraisal of the situation would involve the assimilation of new data. The delusions of the sane are generally supported by the herd, while those of the insane are often antisocial. Yet, — from the point of view of Negroes, who are murdered if they believe in social equality or are maimed for asking for an ice cream soda, and of white people, who are threatened with similar violence for not subscribing to the Southerner's delusions, — such behavior is distinctively antisocial. The inmates of a madhouse are not judged insane by themselves, but by those outside. The fact that abnormal behavior towards Negroes is characteristic of a whole group may be an example illustrating Nietzsche's observation that "insanity in individuals is something rare, — but in groups, parties, nations, and epochs it is the rule."

### NO IMAGES

**S**HE does not know  
Her beauty;  
She thinks her brown body  
Has no glory.

If she could dance  
Naked,  
Under palm trees  
And see her image in the river  
She would know.

But there are no palm trees  
On the street,  
And dish water gives back no images.

— *Waring Cuney*