

The Negro and His Nemesis (January 1904)

Since the appearance of my article on “The Negro in the Class Struggle” in the November *Review* I have received the following anonymous letter:

Elgin, Ill., November 25, 1903

Mr. Debs:—

Sir, I am a constant reader of the *International Socialist Review*. I have analyzed your last article on the Negro question with apprehension and fear. You say that the South is permeated with the race prejudice of the Negro more than the North. I say it is not so. When it comes right down to a test, the North is more fierce in the race prejudice of the Negro than the South ever has been or ever will be. I tell you, you will jeopardize the best interests of the Socialist Party if you insist on political equality of the Negro. For that will not only mean political equality but also social equality eventually. I do not believe you realize what that means. You get social and political equality for the Negro, then let him come and ask the hand of your daughter in marriage, “for that seems to be the height of his ambition,” and we will see whether you still have a hankering for social and political equality for the Negro. For I tell you, the Negro will not be satisfied with equality with reservation. It is impossible for the Anglo-Saxon and the African to live on equal terms. You try it, and he will pull you down to his level. Mr. Lincoln, himself, said, that “There is a physical difference between the white and the black races, which I believe will forever forbid them living together on terms of social and political equality.” If the Socialist leaders stoop to this method to gain votes, then their policy and doctrine is as rotten and degraded as that of the Republican and Democratic parties, and I tell you, if the resolutions are adopted to give the African equality with the Anglo-Saxon you will lose more votes than you now think. I for my part shall do all I can to make you lose as many as possible and there will be others. For don't you know that just a little sour dough will spoil the whole batch of bread. You will do the Negro a greater favor by leaving him where he is. You elevate and educate him, and you will make his position impossible in the USA.

Mr. Debs, if you have any doubts on this subject, I beg you for humanity's sake to read Mr. Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* and I hope that all others who have voiced your sentiments heretofore, will do the same.¹

I assure you, I shall watch the International Socialist Review with the most intense hope of a reply after you have read Mr. Thomas Dixon's message to humanity.

Respectfully yours,

So far a staunch member of the Socialist Party.

The writer, who subscribes himself "A staunch member of the Socialist Party" is the only member of that kind I have ever heard of who fears to sign his name to, and accept responsibility for what he writes. The really "staunch" socialist attacks in the open — he does not shoot from ambush.

The anonymous writer, as a rule, ought to be ignored, since he is unwilling to face those he accuses, while he may be a sneak or coward, traitor or spy, in the role of a "staunch Socialist," whose base design it is to divide and disrupt the movement. For reasons which will appear later, this communication is made an exception and will be treated as if from a known party member in good standing.

It would be interesting to know of what branch our critic is a member and how long he has been, and how he happened to become a "staunch member of the Socialist Party." That he is entirely ignorant of the philosophy of Socialism may not be to his discredit, but that a "staunch member" has not even read the platform of his party not only admits of no excuse, but takes the "staunchness" all out of him, punctures and discredits his foolish and fanatical criticism and leaves him naked and exposed to ridicule and contempt.

The Elgin writer has all the eminent and well recognized qualifications necessary to oppose Negro equality. His criticism and the spirit that prompts it harmonize delightfully with his assumed superiority.

That he may understand that he claims to be a "staunch member" of a party he knows nothing about I here incorporate the "Negro Resolutions" adopted by our last national convention,² which constitute a vital part of the national platform of the Socialist Party and clearly defined its attitude toward the Negro:

Negro Resolution

Whereas, The Negroes of the United States, because of their long training in slavery and but recent emancipation therefrom, occupy a peculiar position in the working class and in society at large;

Whereas, The capitalist class seeks to preserve this peculiar condition, and to foster and increase color prejudice and race hatred between the white worker and the black, so as to make their social and economic interests to appear to be separate and antagonistic, in order that the workers of both races may thereby be more easily and completely exploited;

Whereas, Both the old political parties and educational and religious institutions alike betray the Negro in his present helpless struggle against disfranchisement and violence, in order to receive the economic favors of the capitalist class. Be it, therefore,

Resolved, That we, the Socialists of America, in national convention assembled, do hereby assure our Negro fellow worker of our sympathy with him in his subjection to lawlessness and oppression, and also assure him of the fellowship of the workers who suffer from the lawlessness and exploitation of capital in every nation or tribe of the world. Be it further

Resolved, That we declare to the Negro worker the identity of his interests and struggles with the interests and struggles of the workers of all lands, without regard to race or color or sectional lines; that the causes which have made him the victim of social and political inequality are the effects of the long exploitation of his labor power; that all social and race prejudices spring from the ancient economic causes which still endure, to the misery of the whole human family, that the only line of division which exists in fact is that between the producers and the owners of the world — between capitalism and labor. And be it further

Resolved, That we, the American Socialist Party, invite the Negro to membership and fellowship with us in the world movement for economic emancipation by which equal liberty and opportunity shall be secured to every man and fraternity become the order of the world.

But even without this specific declaration, the position of the the party is so clear that no member and no other person of ordinary intelligence can fail to comprehend it.

The Socialist Party is the congealed, tangible expression of the socialist movement, and the socialist movement is based upon the modern class struggle in which all workers of all countries, regardless of race,

nationality, creed, or sex, are called upon to unite against the capitalist class, their common exploiter and oppressor. In this great class struggle the economic equality of all workers is a foregone conclusion, and he who does not recognize and subscribe to it as one of the basic principles of the socialist philosophy is not a socialist, and if a party member must have been admitted through, misunderstanding or false pretense, and should be speedily set adrift, that he may return to the capitalist parties with their social and economic strata from the “white trash” and “buck nigger” down to the syphilitic snob and harlot heiress who barter virtue for title in the matrimonial market.

I did not say that the race prejudice in the South was more intense than in the North. No such comparison was made and my critic’s denial is therefore unnecessary upon this point. Whether the prejudice of the South differs from that of the North is quite another question and entirely aside from the one at issue, nor is it of sufficient interest to consider at this time.

The Elgin writer says that we shall “jeopardize the best interests of the Socialist Party” if we insist upon the political equality of the Negro. I say that the Socialist Party would be false to its historic mission, violate the fundamental principles of Socialism, deny its philosophy and repudiate its own teachings if, on account of race considerations, it sought to exclude any human being from political equality and economic freedom. Then, indeed, would it not only “jeopardize” its best interests, but forfeit its very life, for it would soon be scorned and deserted as a thing unclean, leaving but a stench in the nostrils of honest men.

Political equality is to be denied the Negro, according to this writer, because it would lead to social equality, and this would be terrible — especially for those “white” men who are already married to Negro women and those “white” women who have long since picked the “buck nigger” in preference to the “white trash” whose social superiority they were unable to distinguish or appreciate.

Of course the Negro will “not be satisfied with equality with reservation.” Why should he be? Would you?

Suppose you change places with the Negro just a year, then let us hear from you — “with reservation.”

What now follows it is difficult to consider with patience: “You get social and political equality for the Negro, then let him come and ask the hand of your daughter in marriage.”

In the first place you don't get equality for the Negro — you haven't got it yourself. In the present social scale there is no difference between you and the Negro— you are on the same level in the labor market, and the capitalist whose agent buys your labor-power don't know and don't care if you are white or black, for he deals with you simply as labor power, and is uninterested save as to the quality and quantity you can supply. He cares no more about the color of your hide than does Armour about that of the steers he buys in the cattle market.

In the next place the Negro will fight for his own political and economic equality. He will take his place in the Socialist Party with the workers of all colors and all countries, and all of them will unite in the fight to destroy the capitalist system tint now makes common slaves of them all.

Foolish and vain indeed is the workingman who makes the color of his skin the stepping-stone to his imaginary superiority. The trouble is with his head, and if he can get that right he will find that what ails him is not superiority but inferiority, and that he, as well as the Negro he despises, is the victim of wage-slavery, which robs him of what he produces and keeps both him and the Negro tied down to the dead level of ignorance and degradation.

As for “the Negro asking the hand of your daughter in marriage,” that is so silly and senseless that the writer is probably after all justified in withholding his name. How about the daughter asking the hand of the Negro in marriage? Don't you know that this is happening every day? Then, according to your logic, the inferiority and degeneracy of the white race is established and the Negro ought to rise in solemn protest against political equality, lest the white man ask the hand of his daughter in marriage.

“It is impossible,” continues our critic, “for the Anglo-Saxon and the African to live upon equal terms. You try it and he will pull you down to his level.” Our critic must have tried something that had a downward pull, for surely that is his present tendency.

The fact is that it is impossible for the Anglo-Saxon and the African to live on unequal terms. A hundred years of American history culminating in the Civil War proves that. Does our correspondent want a repetition of the barbarous experiment?

How does the Anglo-Saxon get along with the Anglo-Saxon — leaving the Negro entirely out of the question? Do they bill and coo and love and caress each other? Is the Anglo-Saxon capitalist so devoted to his Anglo-Saxon wage-slave that he shares his burden and makes him the equal

partner of his wealth and joy? Are they not as widely separated as the earth and sky, and do they not fight each other to the death? Does not the white capitalist look down with contempt upon the white wage-slave? And don't you know that the plutocrat would feel himself pretty nearly, if not quite as outrageously insulted to have his Anglo-Saxon wage slave ask the hand of his daughter in marriage as if that slave were black instead of white?

Why are you not afraid that some Anglo-Saxon engine-wiper on the New York Central will ask the hand of Vanderbilt's daughter in marriage?

What social distinction is there between a white and a black deckhand on a Mississippi steamboat? Is it visible even with the aid of a microscope? They are both slaves, work side by side, sometimes a bunch of black slaves under a white "boss" and at other times a herd of white slaves under a black "boss." Not infrequently you have to take a second look to tell them apart — but all are slaves and all are humans and all are robbed by their "superior" white brother who attends church, is an alleged follower of Jesus Christ and has a horror of "social equality." To him "a slave is a slave for a' that" — when he bargains for labor-power he is not generally concerned about the color of the package, but if he is, it is to give the black preference because it can be bought at a lower price in the labor market, in which equality always prevails — the equality of intellectual and social debasement. To paraphrase Wordsworth:

A wage-slave by the river's brim
A simple wage-slave is to him
And he is nothing more.³

The man who seeks to arouse race prejudice among workingmen is not their friend. He who advises the white wage-worker to look down upon the black wage-worker is the enemy of both.

The capitalist has some excuse for despising the slave — he lives out of his labor, out of his life, and cannot escape his sense of guilt, and so he looks with contempt upon his victim. You can forgive the man who robs you, but you can't forgive the man you rob — in his haggard features you read your indictment and this makes his face so repulsive that you must keep it under your heels where you cannot see it.

One need not experiment with "sour dough" nor waste any time on "sour" literature turned into "Leopard Spots" to arrive at sound conclusions upon these points, and the true Socialist delights not only in taking

his position and speaking out, but in inviting and accepting without complaint all the consequences of his convictions, be they what they may.

Abraham Lincoln was a noble man, but he was not an abolitionist, and what he said in reference to the Negro was with due regard to his circumscribed environs, and, for the time, was doubtless the quintessence of wisdom, but he was not an oracle who spoke for all coming ages, and we are not bound by what he thought prudent to say in a totally different situation half a century ago.

The Socialist platform has not a word in reference to "social equality." It declares in favor of political and economic equality, and only he who denies this to any other human being is unfit for it.

Socialism will give all men economic freedom, equal opportunity to work, and the full product of their labor. Their "social" relations they will be free to regulate to suit themselves. Like religion, this will be an individual matter and our Elgin Negro-hater can consider himself just as "superior" as he chooses, confine his social attentions exclusively to white folks, and enjoy his leisure time in hunting down the black specter who is bent on asking his daughter's hand in marriage.

What warrant has he to say that, the height of the Negro's ambition is to marry a white woman? No more than a Negro has to say that the height of a white woman's ambition is to marry a Negro. The number of such cases is about equally divided and it is so infinitesimally small that any one who can see danger to society in it ought to have his visual organs treated for progressive exaggeration.

The normal Negro has ambition to rise. This is to his credit and ought to be encouraged. He is not asking, nor does he need, the white man's social favors. He can regulate his personal associations with entire satisfaction to himself, without Anglo-Saxon concessions.

Socialism will strike the economic fetters from his body and he himself will do the rest.

Suppose another race as much "superior" to the white as the white is to the black should drop from the skies. Would our Illinois correspondent at once fall upon his knees and acknowledge his everlasting inferiority, or would he seek to overcome it and rise to the higher plane of his superiors?

The Negro, like the white man, is subject to the laws of physical, mental, and moral development. But in his case these laws have been suspended. Socialism simply proposes that the Negro shall have full opportunity to develop his mind and soul, and this will in time emancipate the

race from animalism, so repulsive to those especially whose fortunes are built up out of it.

The African is here and to stay. How came he to our shores? Ask your grandfathers, Mr. Anonymous, and if they will tell the truth you will or should blush for their crimes.

The black man was stolen from his native land, from his wife and child, brought to these shores and made a slave. He was chained and whipped and robbed by his “white superior,” while the son of his “superior” raped the black child before his eyes. For centuries he was kept in ignorance and debased and debauched by the white man's law.

The rape-fiend? Horrible!

Whence came he! Not by chance. He can be accounted for. Trace him to his source and you will find an Anglo-Saxon at the other end. There are no rape-maniacs in Africa. They are the spawn of civilized lust.

Anglo-Saxon civilization is reaping and will continue to reap what it has sown.

For myself, I want no advantage over my fellow man and if he is weaker than I, all the more is it my duty to help him.

Nor shall my door or my heart be ever closed against any human being on account of the color of his skin.

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¹ Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden—1865-1900*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1902. The novel was the first part of a trilogy which included *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) and *The Traitor* (1907), racist historical fiction about the Reconstruction South which served as background material for D.W. Griffith's white supremacist epic film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

² First: Chicago: May 1-6, 1904.

³ Adapted from “Peter Bell: A Tale” (1798) by William Wordsworth (1770-1850). The original reads: “A primrose by a river's brim / A yellow primrose was to him, / And it was nothing more.”