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THE ELEVATION OF THE NEGRO.

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(Written for the Citizen.)

I DO not suppose that it is the desire of the editor of THE CITIZEN that I should either review or attempt to add anything to the vain and wearisome controversy in regard to the comparative capacity of the African and Caucasian races as a moral or ethnological question. It is probable that more has been said and written upon this question during the past sixty years than was ever said or written upon any one phase of human life before. During that time hardly a single man has risen to eminence in politics, literature, or science, in the United States, who has not at one time or another, willingly or unwillingly, added something to the volume of this controversy. In law it has been a most vexed question; in politics, the bane of leaders and parties; in religion, the occasion of bitterness and schism and a most fruitful sower of unbelief. It has colored legislation, flexed the rules of jurisprudence, and fixed the tenor of social life. Science and revelation have been appealed to in support of mutually conflicting hypotheses, by men of equal learning, undoubted sincerity, and unquestioning conviction. Comparative anatomy and comparative philology have been exhausted in proof and disproof. History has been laid under contribution, and its analogies worn threadbare with the friction of angry disputation. Experience and imagination have both determined with unquestioning certainty not merely the fact, but the reason and purpose of the same. To this controversy it would be exceedingly difficult to add anything new. Science has given conflicting opinions. The forum has thundered with equal vehemence upon both sides. The church has fulminated pro and con. The bench has given irreconcilable dicta. Experience proves to-day the very converse of what it yesterday unhesitatingly affirmed. And imagination, based on the theory of a great scientist, sees in a not very remote future the negroid element grafted upon, or absorbed in, our Caucasian stock for the per-

fection and completion of the American type.

In common with all whose memories reach back into the ante-bellum days, I suppose, I have given these theories some attention, and from time to time have inclined to one or the other hypothesis, as the weight of argument and authority seemed to shift from one scale to the other. The time has long passed, however, in which I gave any heed to such disquisitions, or had any regard for such theories. If there be any possibility of arriving at the abstract truth from any comparison of historical or scientific data, the conflicting theories have become too firmly fixed in the minds of their respective supporters to be affected by any new marshalling of facts and arguments.

Not only is this true, but the question of abstract capacity as well as of comparative power is daily becoming one of less and less importance. The day is not so very distant when the scientific relation subsisting between the kinks in the African's hair and the convolutions of his brain was looked upon as an important element in determining not only his natural and political rights, but also his true social and religious status. Custom, tradition, and analogy were all relied upon as important elements of the great argument that for half a century was waged with unexampled fury over the slave's right to that freedom and equality of privilege and opportunity which the Caucasian element of our population without dissent declared to be not only an attribute of white humanity, but one so dear as to be inalienable by its possessor. All this is now in theory admitted. Whether the black man be in potential capacity the equal of the white or not, in the eye of the law he is endowed with like privileges and clothed with the same rights. Incapacity can no longer be alleged as a justification of legal inequality, nor intellectual power made the basis for the assertion of legitimate control.

Be the intellectual capacity of the Negro what it may, in comparison with the white race, he has ceased to be a mere economic factor of our national life. In theory he

stands upon the same plane of civil and political right and the same field of opportunity. Theoretically, he is a part of a self-governing people. Practically he is a cipher in government and an inferior in every civil and social relation. Because of this, the question of the Negro's intellectual and moral capacity is of present interest only as it bears upon the question of his ability to rise in fact to the plane of right which has been bestowed upon him by legal enactment. In other words, the question which is of real interest to the statesman, the patriot, and the philanthropist is this: Has the American Negro sufficient intellectual capacity to compete with the white race in those states where he constitutes a considerable population, without relapsing into slavery, serfdom, or some other form of legal inferiority?

It is a question, of course, which cannot be definitely determined. Men of equal opportunity for observing and equal sincerity of conviction may very well arrive at opposite conclusions in regard to it. Men may even suppose that the present anomalous state of theoretical equality and actual inferiority may continue indefinitely. Indeed this may be said to be the opinion perhaps of the majority of the white people North and South. To the former it is almost a matter of indifference. To the latter it seems impossible that the white race at the South should ever be compelled to yield any share of dominion to what they deem an inferior and servile race. I shall not attempt to discuss this question from an ethnological or historical point of view, but shall merely state some reasons derived from facts which have come under my own observation, or been derived from unquestionable authority, why I think the Negro will yet achieve substantial equality with the whites of the region he chiefly inhabits. In doing this I shall assume two postulates, the very statement of which may startle some of my readers: —

First, That the government of the United States continues substantially of its present organic character; and, second, That the popular sentiment of the North continues favorable to the political equality of the Negro.

Without stopping to consider either of these at any length, it may be proper to remark that it is by no means impossible that the first of these propositions should fail. It is entirely within the limit of possibility that the exigencies of this very question should result in a change of the territorial limits of the Republic, or give rise to a modification of its structural character. With regard to the second, it is a matter of grave doubt whether a majority of the people of the North are not to-day ready to recede from the position taken by the nation in the enfranchisement of the Negro. I shall assume them, however, to be beyond doubt, and accept as substantially true Charles Sumner's declaration that by making him a political factor "we have chained the Negro to the chariot wheel of American progress." In other words, that the impulse of a national spirit and the stimulating and encouraging sympathy of a Northern civilization will be constant elements of the future development of the American Negro.

So, too, I must decline to consider the capacity, actual or comparative, of the Negro as a race, or the limitations and conditions of such capacity. Why Africa is the home of barbarism and Europe the citadel of enlightenment, is quite as great a puzzle to me as the fact that Asia stands midway between. Whether the human race was of one type at the outset and its present distinctions but accidents of clime and time, or whether their relative conditions would have been reversed had Africa fallen to the lot of the Caucasian and Europe been the share of the Negro, I cannot say. Neither do I think that any man is capable of determining the comparative capacity of races or families by the study of structural and ethnological differences. Plausible theories may be constructed in this manner, but time is very apt to dissipate any conclusions based upon such speculation. Without undue assumption, I may say, perhaps, that I think that very much of our difficulty in this respect arises from the fact that we have persisted in basing our theories upon the Negro as a race, instead of confining our attention to the Negro in America.

First, then, I base my confidence in the

future of the Negro in the United States on the fact that *he is an American*. The Negro has been a part of our American life; he has watched its marvellous growth and imbibed no little of its spirit. There is about him none of the submissive hopelessness which marks the menial classes of other lands. He may submit and suffer, but he always hopes for — nay, it may be almost said that he always confidently expects — better things. The story of American freedom did not fall upon the ears of the slave unheeded, nor was the wonderful panorama of our national growth unfolded before his eyes in vain. He was part and parcel of the struggle waged with the wilderness, and learned by contemplation of the result some of the possibilities of achievement. He is conscious that he has helped to make the land what it is, and he fully expects to share in its possession and control. In the darkest hour of slavery this was his consolation. Unlike other oppressed people, he had no thought of migration. His "Promised Land," the "Kingdom" he expected to enjoy, was to come to him in "the old Kentucky home" in that "Dixie Land" which was the inspiration of that strange, prophetic melody which the master caught from the slave's lips and made his own battle-cry. The "Jubilee" to which the slave looked forward was not a mere surcease from labor. It did not embrace any element of revenge or license, but was merely an inspiration, a forecast of the time when the African in his Southern home should peacefully and happily stand upon the same level of right and opportunity as the white man. This element of hope in the future shows no sign of elimination. "I'd like ter know which ob dese yer boys you think I'd better send ter school," said a sturdy colored man to the writer, a few years ago. "Yer see I can't affo'd to give 'em all an eddication, but I think I ought ter do something toward *gittin' my people ready for the great work they'll have put upon their shoulders some day.*"

As an element of the intellectual and moral capacity of the Negro in the United States this spirit of hopeful aspiration, this instinc-

tive Americanism, may be regarded by some as a sentimental fancy rather than an actual force. Yet in estimating the capacity of any race to achieve, the inspiring sentiment — the common purpose and intent — is always among the most important elements, the most difficult of determination and analysis and the one least likely to be appreciated by the indifferent observer.

II. *The past history of the African race in the United States promises great things in the future.*

It has been the custom of those who have theorized upon the future of the African, to allude to his submissive and cheerful acceptance of the fact and hardships of slavery as **conclusive evidence of his incapacity for freedom and self-direction.** The fact that the white man, — at least the white man of modern history, — or even such proud and self-assertive barbarians as the American Indians, would never submit to such continuous degradation, much less thrive and grow under such conditions as slavery imposed, has generally been regarded as conclusive evidence of generic unfitness for any higher role.

There is no questioning the facts on which this inference is based. The Negro race undoubtedly did thrive under the institution of slavery. The white population of the eight states bordering on the Atlantic and the Gulf, and lying between Maryland and Texas, shows an aggregate increase between the first census report and the last of *three hundred and forty per cent.* The colored race in the same states shows an aggregate gain of *five hundred and sixty-four per cent* during the same period. Not only physically but morally and intellectually the colored race made marvellous progress under the influences of slavery. The difference between the American Negro of to-day and his congener of the African coast is the true measure of that development.

It is the first steps that are most difficult — the rudiments that are hardest to learn. The American Negro has taken the first steps in the path of progress, and has learned the rudiments of civilization. It may safely be asserted that no race or no people ever before made as great progress in two hundred and

fifty years, starting from the same level, as the Negro race has made on the American continent. From the foremost Congo type to the lowest grade of the American Negro the distance in intelligence, in morals, in physical training, and material and mechanical power, is such as under other circumstances and with other peoples it has required many centuries to overpass. The very fact that the American Negro has been able to accomplish this — to endure slavery and wrest from its hardships and degradation such substantial advantages — seems to me conclusive evidence of his peculiar fitness to undergo the long and tedious struggle for the actual acquirement of the rights and privileges which are now only theoretically conceded to him.

The comparative capacity of races and peoples can never be actually determined. It is the problem of individual capacity infinitely repeated. The ability to make substantial progress under the conditions in which they are placed is probably the only test of intellectual vigor and capacity which can be applied to races and peoples. The survival of the fittest is the real law of human excellence — the term "fittest" not being taken, as it so frequently is, in a sentimental signification, as meaning of the best, the noblest, or the strongest, but signifying, as the great naturalist intended, adaptation to its surrounding conditions — the power to achieve the greatest progress under the conditions in which they are placed. It is doubtful if any other race could have shown like progress under similar conditions, with that which the African has already achieved in the United States.

III. *The progress of the race since the close of the war of rebellion has fully justified the deductions based upon its previous history on the Western Continent.*

History may well be challenged to produce a parallel to the progress of the American Negro during the past twenty years under circumstances anything like as difficult as those which confronted him on the day of his emancipation. From a homeless, houseless, wifeless, childless mass of helpless humanity, he has become a greater producer

than when a slave, a fairly moral citizen, reasonably amenable to law, and showing a smaller percentage of paupers dependent upon the state in whole or in part for their support than any like population in the civilized world. Compared with the non-landholding whites of the South, it is safe to affirm that the Negro has made far greater progress in wealth, intelligence, and all that goes to make up a self-supporting and self-directing people than the whites who have lived during that time under the most nearly assimilated conditions. As laborers they have gained, rather than lost, in competition with the white wage-workers of that region. While the percentage of illiteracy among the poorer whites has undoubtedly increased, the freedman, from being wholly illiterate, shows a progress in rudimentary acquirement simply amazing under any circumstances and hardly less than miraculous when we consider the rate of wages and the conditions that have surrounded his battle for life during this time. He has pushed his way up in the simpler manual avocations by the superseding and displacement of the white mechanical laborer. He has taken almost entirely from the white man's hand the plane, the sledge, the trowel, the painter's brush, and the shoemaker's awl, and the fact of his presence holds the price of white labor in manufacture so far below the rest of the country as to be deemed starvation rates by Northern workmen. All these facts are either patent to any one who has any knowledge of the freedman's status in 1865 and in 1885, or who will study with intelligent care the marvellous revelations of the census of 1880. For myself, it is but just for me to say that I have watched this wonderful growth from a peculiarly advantageous point of observation. From the close of the war until 1880, I was a resident of the South and noted the various steps of this race's progress from a position that perhaps afforded me a wider and more varied opportunity to study its character than any other could have given. That I have given this subject special attention is perhaps too well known to require to be stated here.

There is but one element of the recent history of the race to which I wish to call especial attention. It is often stated as an undeniable fact, from which the advocates of the race's incapacity are wont to infer the truth of their position, that the Negro is incapable of independent, organized, concerted action. This is usually inferred from the fact that though in some states they actually predominated in numbers, they submitted to continued enslavement, instead of conspiring to overthrow and destroy their oppressors. This is a fact easily explainable. They knew the odds against them better than their depreciators would have us suppose. They fully understood that it was not the white people of one locality, but the Caucasian race in the United States whom they would have to overcome in order to achieve liberty. The conclusion drawn from this false inference, however, is most signally rebutted by the history of the African church organizations at the South since their establishment after the close of the war. They have not only become self-supporting, with their own paid ministers and bishops of their own race, but are already become active and potent influences in the field of missionary effort. The capacity which has organized the colored race of the South so efficiently, and out of its poverty, ignorance, and inexperience has created such remarkably compact and harmonious religious instrumentalities, is not one that can safely be disregarded as an element of our future. From these considerations and others of a like character which will readily occur to the thoughtful reader, it is fair to conclude that the intellectual capacity of the American Negro is such as to ensure his future development and enable him successfully to compete, under existing and probable conditions, with the white population by which he is surrounded.