The Negro’s Fatherland

The future of Africa is one of the most important questions to be answered after this war. The very silence today concerning that future, on both sides of the forces at war, emphasizes its importance. We must remember that in Africa we have today not only the greatest world mine of undeveloped human labor but, also, that much of the raw material which the modern world particularly wants is to be found in Africa more abundantly that anywhere else. Let us note the list: Palm-oil, cocoa, mahogany, ebony, cork, cotton, rubber, ivory, ostrich feathers, gold, copper, iron, zinc, tin, lead and diamonds,— these are the present gifts of Africa to the world. Others in abundance hide in her bosom. The fight for the ownership of these materials and the domination of this labor was a prime cause of the present war. If this question is to be left unsettled after this war it is going to be a prime cause of future wars.

Why, then, are we so silent concerning the fate of something between 150,000,000 and 200,000,000 human beings? I presume that the cause of our indifference is largely psychological. It is the penalty of human degradation which always exacts payment from oppressor and oppressed. Today it is possible to ignore the Negro because of a history of degradation the parallel of which the modern world does not furnish. In ancient Mediterranean civilization Negro blood was predominant in many great nations and present in nearly all. Negro genius and Negro civilization gave here their great gifts to the world. In the European middle ages when Africa became more or less separated from direct contact with Europe, nevertheless, African culture filtered into Europe, and legend and story and song came out of the dark continent. There was then no question of racial inferiority based upon color. But then, beginning late in the fifteenth century, the world for four hundred years raped this continent on a scale never before equalled. The result was not

only the degradation of Africa, it was a moral degradation of those who were guilty; and we are still living in the shadow of the debauch of the African slave trade. It comes natural for us to have great masses of unthought-of men; to conceive of society as built upon an unsocial mudsill. It is possible for great labor organizations like the American Federation of Labor to organize themselves upon distinctly aristocratic lines, leaving out of account and out of thought certain so-called lower elements of labor. It is even possible for an organization like the League of Small and Subject Nationalities to bring in Africa only as an accident and after-thought. This mental attitude toward Africa and its problems builds itself upon unclear thinking based on the tyranny of conventional words.

When we speak of modern African slavery we think of modern slavery as a survival of ancient slavery. But it was not. The cleft between the two was absolute. Modern African slavery was the beginning of the modern labor problem, and must be looked at and interpreted from that point of view unless we would lose ourselves in an altogether false analogy. Modern world commerce, modern imperialism, the modern factory system and the modern labor problem began with the African slave trade. The first modern method of securing labor on a wide commercial scale and primarily for profit was inaugurated in the middle of the fifteenth century and in the commerce between Africa and America. Through the slave trade Africa lost at least 100,000,000 human beings, with all the attendant misery and economic and social disorganization. The survivors of this wholesale rape became a great international laboring force in America on which the modern capitalistic movement has been built and out of which modern labor problems have arisen. We have tried ever since to keep these black men and their descendants at the bottom of the scale on the theory that they were not thoroughly men, that they cannot be self-respecting members of and contributors to modern culture—an assumption purely modern and undreamed of in ancient or medieval days.

If, now, this same psychology and this same determination to exploit and enslave these people passes over into the new world after the war, what can we expect but, on the one hand, persistence of the idea that there must be an exploited class at the bottom of civilization and, on the other, an endeavor by endless war and rapine, futile at first but in the end bound to be triumphant, by which these millions of people will gain their right to think and act. No modern world can dream of holding 200,000,000 of people in permanent slavery even though they be black. If it tries, the cost will be terrible. If we would avoid this cost then we must begin the freeing of Africa through this war.

There is an unusual opportunity to do this. Africa is today held by Negro
troops trained under European white officers. These Negro troops have saved France. They have conquered German Africa. They and their American Negro brothers are helping to save Belgium. It would be the least that Europe could do in return and some faint reparation for the terrible world history between 1441 and 1861 to see that a great free central African state is erected out of German East Africa and the Belgian Congo. Surely after Belgium has suffered almost as much from Germany as Africa has suffered from her, she ought to be willing to give up the Congo to this end; and it would be right that England should refrain from taking German East Africans as well as refrain from handing it back. Out of this state we would make a great modern effort to restore the ancient efficiency of the land that gave the iron age to all the world, and that for ages led in agriculture, weaving, metal working, and the traffic of the market place. Here is a chance such as the world has not seen since the fifteenth century. Liberia and Haiti were never given a sincere chance and were from first to last harassed, as only modern capitalism can harass little and hated nations.

The effect of such a new and sincere start in Africa would be tremendous. Its first effect would be upon the millions in Africa and then upon their descendants throughout the world. In the West Indies and in South America are some 30,000,000 of men of Negro descent. They have given literature and freedom to Brazil; they have given industry and romance to the West Indies; and they have given to North America art and music and human sensibility. In South America they may lose themselves in the blood of other people, but in the West Indies and North America they are striving for self-expression and need only such encouragement as just treatment of their fatherland and its spiritual effect on the whole world would give. I trust, therefore, that among the new nations that are to start forth after this war will be a new Africa and a new beginning of culture for the Negro race.
Mohandas Gandhi was born nineteen months after my birth. As a school-boy in a small town in the northeastern part of the United States, I knew little of Asia and the schools taught less. The one tenuous link which bound me to India was skin color. That was important in America and even in my town, although little was said about it. But I was conscious of being the only brown face in my school and although my dark family had lived in this valley for two hundred years or more, I was early cognizant of a status different from that of my white schoolmates.

As I grew up there seemed to be no future for me in the place of my birth, and at seventeen I went South, where formerly colored people had been slaves, so that I could be trained to work among them. There at Fisk University I first became aware of a world of colored folk and I learned not only of the condition of American Negroes but began to read of China and India; and to make Africa the special object of my study. I published my first book in 1896 while Gandhi was in South Africa, and my subject was the African slave trade. We did not at the time have much direct news from Africa in the American newspapers, but I did have several black students from South Africa and began to sense the tragedy of that awful land. It was not until after the First World War that I came to realize Gandhi's work for Africa and the world.

I was torn by the problem of peace. As a youth I was certain that freedom for the colored peoples of the earth would come only by war; by doing to white Europe and America what they had done to black Africa and colored Asia. This seemed the natural conclusion from the fairy tales called history on which I had been nourished. Then in the last decades of the 19th century, as I came to manhood, I caught the vision of world peace and signed the pledge never to take part in war.

With the First World War came my first knowledge of Gandhi. I came to know Lajpat Rai and Madame Naidu. John Haynes Holmes was one of my coworkers in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and he was a friend and admirer of Gandhi. Indeed the “Colored People” referred to in our name was not originally confined to America. I remember the discussion we had on inviting Gandhi to visit America and how we were forced to conclude that this land was not civilized enough to receive a colored man as an honored guest.

In 1929, as the Depression loomed, I asked Gandhi for a message to American Negroes, which I published in the Crisis. He said:

Let not the 12 million Negroes be ashamed of the fact that they are the grandchildren of slaves. There is dishonor in being slave-owners. But let us not think of honor or dishonor in connection with the past. Let us realize that the future is with those who would be pure, truthful and loving. For as the old wise men have said: Truth ever is, untruth never was. Love alone binds and truth and love accrue only to the truly humble.

This was written on May Day, 1929. Through what phantasmagoria of hurt and evil the world has passed since then! We American Negroes have reeled and staggered from side to side and forward and back. In the First World War, we joined with American capital to keep Germany and Italy from sharing the spoils of colonial imperialism. In the Depression we sank beneath the burden of poverty, ignorance and disease due to discrimination, unemployment and crime. In the Second World War, we again joined Western capital against Fascism and failed to realize how the Soviet Union sacrificed her blood and savings to save the world.

But we did realize how out of war began to arise a new colored world free from the control of Europe and America. We began too to realize the role of Gandhi and to evaluate his work as a guide for the black people of the United States. As an integral part of this country, as workers, consumers and co-creators of its culture, we could not look forward to physical separation except as a change of masters. But what of Gandhi’s program of peace and non-violence? Only in the last year have American Negroes begun to see the possibility of this program being applied to the Negro problems in the United States.

Personally I was long puzzled. After the World Depression, I sensed a recurring contradiction. I saw Gandhi’s non-violence gain freedom for India, only to be followed by violence in all the world. I realized that the vaunted “hundred years of peace,” from Waterloo to the Battle of the Marne, was not peace at all but war, of Europe and North America on Africa and Asia, with
only troubled bits of peace between the colonial conquerors. I saw Britain,
France, Belgium and North America trying to continue to force the world to
sever them by monopoly of land, technique and machines, backed by physical
force which has now culminated in the use of atomic power. Only the
possession of this power by the Soviet Union prevents the restoration of
colonial imperialism of the West over Asia and Africa, under the leadership of
men like [John Foster] Dulles and [Anthony] Eden. Perhaps in this extraordi-
nary impasse the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi may have a chance to prevail
in the world. Recent events in the former slave territory of the United States
throw a curious light on this possibility.

In Montgomery, Alabama, the former capital of the Confederate States
which fought for years to make America a slave nation, the black workers last
year refused any longer to use the public buses on which their seats had long
been segregated from those of the white passengers, paying the same fare. In
addition to separation, there was abuse and insult by the white conductors.
This custom had continued for 75 years. Then last year a colored seamstress
got tired of insult and refused to give her seat to a white man. The black
workers led by young, educated ministers began a strike which stopped the
discrimination, aroused the state and the nation and presented an unbending
front of non-violence to the murderous mob which hitherto has ruled the
South. The occurrence was extraordinary. It was not based on any first-hand
knowledge of Gandhi and his work. Their leaders like Martin Luther King
knew of non-resistance in India; many of the educated teachers, business and
professional men had heard of Gandhi. But the rise and spread of this
movement was due to the truth of its underlying principles and not to direct
teaching or propaganda. In this aspect it is a most interesting proof of the truth
of the Gandhian philosophy.

The American Negro is not yet free. He is still discriminated against,
oppressed and exploited. The recent court decisions in his favor are excellent
but are as yet only partially enforced. It may well be that the enforcement of
these laws and real human equality and brotherhood in the United States will
come only under the leadership of another Gandhi.
On Being Crazy

It was one o'clock and I was hungry. I walked into a restaurant, seated myself and reached for the bill-of-fare. My table companion rose.

"Sir," said he, "do you wish to force your company on those who do not want you?"

No, said I, I wish to eat.

"Are you aware, Sir, that this is social equality?"

Nothing of the sort, Sir, it is hunger—and I ate.

The day's work done, I sought the theatre. As I sank into my seat, the lady shrank and squirmed.

I beg pardon, I said.

"Do you enjoy being where you are not wanted?" she asked coldly.

Oh no, I said.

"Well you are not wanted here."

I was surprised. I fear you are mistaken, I said. I certainly want the music and I like to think the music wants me to listen to it.

"Usher," said the lady, "this is social equality."

No, madame, said the usher, it is the second movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

After the theatre, I sought the hotel where I had sent my baggage. The clerk scowled.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Rest, I said.

"This is a white hotel," he said.

I looked around. Such a color scheme requires a great deal of cleaning, I said, but I don't know that I object.

"We object," said he.

Then why—I began, but he interrupted.

"We don't keep 'niggers'," he said, "we don't want social equality."

From The Crisis, June 1923.
Neither do I. I replied gently, I want a bed.
I walked thoughtfully to the train. I’ll take a sleeper through Texas. I’m a bit
dissatisfied with this town.
“Can’t sell you one.”
I only want to hire it, said I, for a couple of nights.
“Can’t sell you a sleeper in Texas,” he maintained. “They consider that
social equality.”
I consider it barbarism, I said, and I think I’ll walk.
Walking, I met a wayfarer who immediately walked to the other side of the
road where it was muddy. I asked his reasons.
“‘Niggers’ is dirty,” he said.
So is mud, said I. Moreover I added, I am not as dirty as you—at least,
not yet.
“But you’re a ‘nigger’, ain’t you?” he asked.
My grandfather was so-called.
“Well then!” he answered triumphantly.
Do you live in the South? I persisted, pleasantly.
“Sure,” he growled, “and starve there.”
I should think you and the Negroes might get together and vote out
starvation.
“We don’t let them vote.”
We? Why not? I said in surprise.
“‘Niggers’ is too ignorant to vote.”
But, I said, I am not so ignorant as you.
“But you’re a ‘nigger’.”
Yes, I’m certainly what you mean by that.
“Well then!” he returned, with that curiously inconsequential note of
triumph. “Moreover,” he said, “I don’t want my sister to marry a nigger.”
I had not seen his sister, so I merely murmured, let her say, no.
“By God you shan’t marry her, even if she said yes.”
But—but I don’t want to marry her, I answered a little perturbed at the
personal turn.
“Why not!” he yelled, angrier than ever.
Because I’m already married and I rather like my wife.
“Is she a ‘nigger’?” he asked suspiciously.
Well, I said again, her grandmother—was called that.
“Well then!” he shouted in that oddly illogical way.
I gave up. Go on, I said, either you are crazy or I am.
“We both are,” he said as he trotted along in the mud.