

Democracy and the Negro

By Pearl S. Buck

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES:

Your editorial of Nov. 12, "The Other Side of Harlem," denies the basic cause for the situation in our country of which the new manifestation of crime in Harlem is only a symptom slight enough for what it signifies. Nor are the constructive measures proposed sufficient. It would be impossible for any accumulation of social welfare work to solve the situation which produces crime in Harlem. We all know that merely to make arrests and impose jail sentences can be nothing but an emergency measure and one which promises no fundamental improvement for the future. But equally palliative are the efforts of welfare workers on the basis upon which they are now organized.

The reason why colored Americans are compelled to live in ghettos, where they are helpless against high rents and miserable housing, is the segregation to which race prejudice compels them. Race prejudice compels colored people to take what work they can get because there are so many jobs Negroes cannot get. Race prejudice makes and keeps Negroes' wages low because some labor unions will not admit colored labor on the same basis as white labor. Race prejudice and race prejudice alone is the root of the plight of people in greater and lesser Harlems all over our country.

Hope Becoming Despair

As a result of the effects of race prejudice a very serious conviction is gradually becoming settled in the minds of colored Americans all over our country. They are coming to see that what they have been taught and have believed is not true—namely, that if colored people can be patient and good and show themselves obedient and humble they will inevitably prove themselves worthy citizens and will therefore receive the rewards of full citizenship. They are beginning to believe, and this in very large numbers, that individual or even collective worth as human beings gains them nothing so long as they are Negroes. The hopefulness natural to their race is now changing to despair. Colored leaders are saying today that no amount of achievement will gain anything for the colored people as a whole, and that, moreover, they no longer believe the people of the United States will fight for democracy. Americans may fight to

In a letter to The New York Times dated November 14 and printed November 15, Miss Buck, one of the foremost writers of our day, has caught and expressed so completely the problem of the Negro and democracy in America that for the benefit of its readers who may not have seen The Times of November 15, The Crisis reprints the letter here in full. Miss Buck's letter was inspired by the report of a "crime wave" in Harlem, a circumstance largely created in the editorial rooms of some New York daily newspapers

live and do as they like, they say, but not for democracy.

This conviction of some colored leaders and many more colored people is rapidly permeating the whole twelve millions. When hope is taken away from a people moral degeneration follows swiftly after. Young colored men and women today are giving up hope of justice or security in their own country. When this hopelessness reaches down to certain strata in any society, outbreaks of crime are inevitable. We must expect it in many places besides Harlem. It has already occurred in other cities.

The swiftness with which this long-gathering despair has come to a present head is due, perhaps, more than to any other immediate cause, to the refusal of the majority of defense industries to employ colored labor on anything like an equal basis with white labor. To the colored American this is final proof of the hopelessness of his plight, that even in the defense of his country he is not allowed his share of work.

Segregation Curbs Patriotism¹

And yet it may be a mistake to say that this denial of the chance at jobs is more to blame than the resolute segregation in the Army or the practical limitation in the Navy. The colored American, thanks to an education in democracy, now really wants to see his country a democracy. When he defends the United States of America he does not want to do so segregated and limited. This contradicts his idea of a democracy. He has grown up a good deal since the World War. And he has not forgotten that war. He is willing to

fight and die again, but not for something he does not possess anyway.

The white American is conscious of this feeling now seething and mounting in the hearts of his colored countrymen. But the white American sedulously avoids acknowledging or indeed even facing it. With the same curious blindness which none of us could understand in France, we white Americans avoid the reality in our own country. We do not want to discover the real truth about the colored American, which is that our prejudice denies him democracy. We refuse to face it because we do not want to change the status of the colored person. We wish to keep him the servant of the white man.

Hypocrisy Seen

I am, I think, realistic and objective on this matter of race, having lived most of my life among colored peoples. My own ancestry is entirely Southern, and I am very familiar with the problems of white and colored in the South. I do not, however, believe their solution is to be found in what the average white Southerner says, in the familiar patter, that the Negro is a childish creature, delightful enough in his place, who only wants to be taken care of and fed and sheltered and treated kindly. That the Negro in the South often glibly falls in with such assertions means nothing; that Negro is afraid of his white master and says what the white man wants him to say. The same Negro quickly expresses himself in totally different terms as soon as he changes his locale and is relieved of his fear.

But be that as it may, the real point is that our democracy does not allow for the present division between a white ruler race and a subject colored race, and we ought to make up our minds as to what we want and then move to accomplish it. If the United States is to include subject and ruler peoples, then let us be honest about it and change the Constitution and make it plain that Negroes cannot share the privileges of the white people. True, we would then be totalitarian rather than democratic; but if that is what we want, let us say so and let us tell the Negro so. Then the white Americans will be relieved of the necessity of hypocrisy and the colored people will know where they are. They may even settle down into a docile subject race, so long as we are able to keep the

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weapons of rebellion from them—and these include education.

As an American I should deplore any such thing, and yet the world needs this sort of clarification. Democracy now suffers from vagueness because of the lack of relation between principle and action. With all the evils that Hitlerism has, at least it has one virtue, that it makes no pretense of loving its fellow-man and of wanting all people to be free and equal. Everybody knows where nazism stands and what to expect of it. Cruel as it is, and dangerous as it is to civilization, it is less cruel, and it may be even less dangerous in the end, than the sort of democracy which is not real enough or strong enough to practice what it preaches. To destroy hope utterly is kinder than to allow it without intending to let it be fulfilled.

Patience Waning

The importance of facing the situation between white and colored people in our own country is twofold—it is upon this rock that our own ship of democracy may go down first, and upon this rock, too, that all peoples may divide into the ultimate enmity. Everywhere in the world the colored peoples are asking each other if they must forever endure the arrogant ruling white race. They feel they have been very long patient, but they cannot be patient forever and they will not. In India such men as Nehru, now again in jail at the hands of white men fighting for democracy in Europe; in our own county colored Americans, as intelligent, and well educated as Nehru, barred by their color alone from an equal chance with white Americans to earn their living or to defend democracy—there is a deep, subtle, dangerous relationship between them. We are foolish if we do not realize it.

For in many educated colored Americans hopelessness results not in simple crime but in a rejection of patriotism. There are those, and some of them leaders, who favor Japan in the present crisis, seeing in Japan the future leader of all colored peoples in the world. There are those who prefer Hitler to British imperialism, feeling that if English rule over colored races can be destroyed, then Hitler can be dealt with afterward as the less established evil. At home and abroad the white race has the choice to make—whether it will follow the totalitarian principle of ruler and subject races, even to the inevitable end of rebellion and the worst of wars, or whether peoples of all colors will decide to work out ways of living in mutual harmony and freedom.

Crisis Near at Hand

Such is the situation between colored

and white peoples at this moment. It is idle to say that the crisis is two steps off and let us attend first to defense and the present war. Crisis between white and colored is not two steps off—it is close, inextricably mingled with this war, because the war against nazism carries race equality or inequality as one of its main issues. It does no good that we ourselves keep the issue hushed and hidden and apart from the thinking of the mass of the white people. The crisis approaches, whether white people are willing to know it or not. It approaches in the world, and with that inexorable march our own people are keeping step.

What then should we do if we are honest believers in the democratic way of life? We must move swiftly and at once, and our President should not fear so to move, to do away with the effects of race prejudice upon colored Americans. Race prejudice cannot be taken out of people unfortunately by surgical operation, although it is an evil and foreign growth. Children do not have it until they catch it from older people. I have frequent proof of this, the most recent being through the 12-year-old son of an American friend newly returned from China.

This white child goes to public school in a New Jersey town. When a class picnic was to be held it was found that the place chosen excluded colored people. To his deep indignation the boy found that his teachers, instead of changing the place, accepted the exclusion and managed by "tactful ways" to see that no colored children came to the picnic. The white boy was shocked to the soul at this injustice in his own land to which he had long looked with love and pride while he was growing up in China. His hurt was personal, too, because his own best friend happened to be a fine colored boy. "I won't go if Henry can't go," was his right decision.

Adolescents Little Prejudiced

Nor do adolescents have race prejudice in anything like the degree that older people have. Recently in Texas there were a championship white football team and a championship colored team at high schools in the same city. Of course their managers and coaches would not schedule them to play each other. But the white team went out one morning by secret arrangement and played the colored team. They said to their coach when they returned: "We just wanted to see which of us was better." As it happened, it was a tie game, and though there is symbolism enough in that ideal ending, the significance of the incident, and of plenty of others like it, is that the boys, colored and

white, had no prejudice against each other.

Intelligent white people seldom suffer from race prejudice so severely as ignorant ones, and there are many who would, if they dared, acknowledge that they have none whatever. But too few dare. For wherever the disease of race prejudice is found it is bitter and incurable and dies only with death.

But if nothing can remove race prejudice from those in whom it is ingrained, they should not be allowed to violate our nation's democracy. At least, our government can and should see to it that all Americans shall have equal economic opportunity and that colored people in this democracy shall not suffer insult because of their color. It can and should insist that colored citizens shall share responsibility with white citizens for the welfare of the nation, and thus remove the chief reason for the half-tolerant, wholly patronizing contempt of the white for the colored and thereby build in the colored citizen belief in himself. Democratic government must keep apace of science and realize that there is no basis beyond prejudice for the belief that one race is intrinsically superior to another. Continued injustice may make any one inferior, temporarily, regardless of his color.

I read with complete approval of every plan to better the conditions under which colored people must live and work. But until race prejudice is conquered and its effects removed, the bitter fact remains that the colored American knows he will not get a better job for being better educated and better housed or for having in his childhood more playgrounds. He will not be given an equal chance with the white American of his class and ability. Race prejudice will still deny democracy to him.

Are we Americans to go on accepting the stupidities of race prejudice? I know the oft-repeated wearisome defense. Intermarriage is the fearful specter behind everything. On that there is but one answer. Are we to deny to 12,000,000 Americans the rights and privileges of our country, and are we to risk our very democracy itself, by maintaining a determined ruler-subject relationship between white and colored, because some day a few white and colored individuals may choose to marry each other?

Is democracy right or is it wrong? If it is right, then let us dare to make it true.

PEARL S. BUCK.

Perkasie, Pa., Nov. 14, 1941.

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