
The Negro and the Class Struggle.

by Eugene V. Debs

Published as the lead article in *The International Socialist Review*, v. 4, no. 5 (Nov. 1903), pp. 257-260.

This article was omitted from the Presidential campaign-related volume of Debs'

writings and speeches published by *The Appeal to Reason* in 1908.

It so happens that I write upon the negro question in compliance with the request of the editor of the *International Socialist Review* [A.M. Simons] in the state of Louisiana, where the race prejudice is as strong and the feeling against the "nigger" as bitter and relentless as when Lincoln's proclamation of emancipation lashed the waning



confederacy into fury and incited the final and desperate attempts to burst the bonds that held the southern states in the federal union. Indeed, so thoroughly is the south permeated with the malign spirit of race hatred that even socialists are to be found, and by no means rarely, who either share directly in the race hostility against the negro, or avoid the issue, or apologize for the social

obliteration of the color line in the class struggle.

The white man in the south declares that "the nigger is all right in his place"; that is, as menial, servant, and slave. If he dare hold up his head, feel the thrill of manhood in his veins, and nurse the hope that some day may bring deliverance; if in his brain the thought of freedom dawns and in his heart the aspiration to rise above the animal plane and propensities of his sires, he must be made to realize that notwithstanding the white man is civilized (?) the black man is a "nigger" still and must so remain as long as the planets wheel in space.

But while the white man is considerate enough to tolerate the negro "in his place," the remotest suggestion at social recognition arouses all the pent up wrath of his Anglo-Saxon civilization; and my observation is that the less real ground there is for such indignant assertion of self-superiority, the more passionately it is proclaimed.

At Yoakum, Texas, a few days ago, leaving the depot with two grips in my hands, I passed four or five bearers of the white man's burden perched on a railing and decorating their environment with tobacco juice. One of them, addressing me, said: "There's a nigger that'll carry your grips." A second one added: "That's what he's here for," and the third chimed in with "That's right, by God." Here was a savory bouquet of white superiority. One glance was sufficient to satisfy me that they represented all there is of justification for the implacable hatred of the negro race. They were ignorant, lazy, unclean, totally void of ambi-

tion, themselves the foul product of the capitalist system and held in lowest contempt by the master class, yet esteeming themselves immeasurably above the cleanest, most intelligent and self-respecting negro, having by reflex absorbed the “nigger” hatred of their masters.

As a matter of fact the industrial supremacy of the south before the war would not have been possible without the negro, and the south of today would totally collapse without his labor. Cotton culture has been and is the great staple and it will not be denied that the fineness and superiority of the fibre that makes the export of the southern states the greatest in the world is due in large measure to the genius of the negroes charged with its cultivation.

The whole world is under obligation to the negro, and that the white heel is still upon the black neck is simply proof that the world is not yet civilized.

The history of the negro in the United States is a history of crime without a parallel.

Why should the white man hate him? Because he stole him from his native land and for two centuries and a half robbed him of the fruit of his labor, kept him in beastly ignorance, and subjected him to the brutal domination of the lash? Because he tore the black child from the breast of its mother and ravished the black man’s daughter before her father’s eyes?

There are thousands of negroes who bear testimony in their whitening skins that men who so furiously resent the suggestion of “social equality” are far less sensitive in respect to the sexual equality of the races.

But of all the senseless agitation in capitalist society, that in respect to “social equality” takes the palm. The very instant it is mentioned the old aristocratic plantation owner’s shrill cry about the “buck nigger” marrying the “fair young daughter” of his master is heard from the tomb and echoed and re-echoed across the spaces and repeated by the “white trash” in proud vindication of their so-

cial superiority.

Social equality, forsooth! Is the black man pressing his claims for social recognition upon his white burden bearer? Is there any reason why he should? Is the white man’s social recognition of his own white brother such to excite the negro’s ambition to covet the noble prize? Has the negro any greater desire, or is there any reason why he should have, for social intercourse with the white man than the white man has for social relations with the negro? This phase of the negro question is pure fraud and serves to mask the real issue, which is not *social equality*, BUT ECONOMIC FREEDOM.

There never was any social inferiority that was not the shrivelled fruit of economic inequality.

The negro, given economic freedom, will not ask the white man any social favors; and the burning question of “social equality” will disappear like mist before the sunrise.

I have said and say again that, properly speaking, there is no negro question outside of the labor question — the working class struggle. Our position as socialists and as a party is perfectly plain. We have simply to say: “The class struggle is colorless.” The capitalists, white, black, and all other colors, on the other side.

When Marx said: “Workingmen of all countries unite,” he gave concrete expression to the socialist philosophy of the class struggle; unlike the framers of the declaration of independence who announced that “all men are created equal” and then basely repudiated their own doctrine, Marx issued the call to all the workers of the globe, regardless of race, sex, creed, or any other condition whatsoever.

As a socialist party we receive the negro and all other races upon absolutely equal terms. We are the party of the working class, the whole working class, and we will not suffer ourselves to be divided by any specious appeal to race prejudice; and if we should be coaxed or driven from the

straight road we will be lost in the wilderness and ought to perish there, for we shall no longer be a socialist party.

Let the capitalist press and capitalist “public opinion” indulge themselves in alternate flattery and abuse of the negro; we as socialists will receive him in our party, treat him in our counsels, and stand by him all around the same as if his skin were white instead of black; and this we do not from any consideration of sentiment, but because it accords with the philosophy of socialism, the genius of the class struggle, and is eternally right and bound to triumph in the end.

With the “nigger” question, the “race war” from the capitalist viewpoint we have nothing to do. In capitalism the negro question is a grave one and will grow more threatening as the contradictions and complications of capitalist society multiply, but this need not worry us. Let them settle the negro question in their way, if they can. We have nothing to do with it, for that is their fight. We have simply to open the eyes of as many negroes as we can and bring them into the socialist movement to do battle for emancipation from wage slavery, and when the working class have triumphed in the class struggle and stand forth economic as well as political free men, the race problem will forever disappear.

Socialists should with pride proclaim their

sympathy with and fealty to the black race, and if any there be who hesitate to avow themselves in the face of ignorant and unreasoning prejudice, they lack the true spirit of the slavery-destroying revolutionary movement.

The voice of socialism must be as inspiring music to the ears of those in bondage, especially the weak black brethren, doubly enslaved, who are bowed to the earth and groan in despair beneath the burden of the centuries.

For myself, my heart goes to the negro and I make no apology to any white man for it. In fact, when I see the poor, brutalized, outraged black victim, I feel a burning sense of guilt for his intellectual poverty and moral debasement that makes me blush for the unspeakable crimes committed by my own race.

In closing, permit me to express the hope that the next convention may repeal the resolutions on the negro question. The negro does not need them and they serve to increase rather than diminish the necessity for explanation.

We have nothing special to offer the negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races.

The Socialist Party is the party of the working class, regardless of color — the whole working class of the whole world.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2005. • Free reproduction permitted.