

“Research barriers in the South” ... L. D. Reddick. Reprinted from the *Social Frontier*, December 1937, Vol. IV. No. 30. pp. 85, 86.

“Research Barriers in the South”

THERE seems to be a general lament on the part of professors in the Southern universities that uncommonly high and overwhelming barriers face the scholar in that section of the land. In this spirit Dr. Wilson Gee five years ago issued *Research Barriers in the South* for the Southern Regional Committee of the Social Science Research Council, and more recently has returned to the theme in the April issue of *Social Forces*. The thesis runs along in this fashion: The South is not really a cultural desert so far as creative scholarship is concerned. Because of the lack of facilities and opportunities found elsewhere, “a steady stream of the best intellectual and leadership qualities has been pouring from out the borders . . .” Thus, by showing statistically that the equipment is inferior, the teaching load heavier, the appropriations for study inadequate or indifferent, the writers and speakers are in a position to “explain” the present degree of advancement and at the same time to plead for larger “recognition and support.”

All this is very well and good. The last mentioned argument is especially laudable. From the standpoint of sectional patriotism, it may be important that some of the better minds “go North.” However, despite the continuous complaint concerning “talent pouring out,” this proves a little weak. The figures of this same Committee reveal that during the years studied, “there was a net loss to the South and hence net gain to the North and West of 31 (!) social scientists”; nevertheless, 770 men eminent enough to be listed in *American Men of Science* went into the South while only 660 left—a gain of 110.

PENALIZING THE NEGRO SCHOLAR

But what makes the dissertations and discussions hollow to the core is that these supposedly scientific students of human affairs ignore absolutely the most dramatic part of their story, the much-less-imaginary barriers to the work of a body of men in their midst, the Negro scholars.

In *Research Barriers in the South* there does not appear the name of a single Negro, nor of such institutions as Fisk University in Nashville or Howard University in Washington, D. C., though ample space is devoted to Converse College, Agnes Scott College, Millsaps and Sweet Briar.

Every barrier faced by these others is encountered with increased difficulty by the Negro scholar. The inadequacy of buildings, books, and apparatus is so patent that the Negro deans and registrars in convention this year advised against the attempt to give graduate training in the publicly-supported institutions of the several states. As for salaries, the general condition may be suggested in the observation that the income of the presidents of these colleges is far above that of their faculties. Yet when the president of the state college for Negroes in Florida raised his pay in the budget, it is reported that the Governor vetoed the increase with the words, "No Negro is worth \$4,000." In the government-supported Howard University and the three leading "privately endowed" schools—Fisk, Atlanta, and Dillard—the *average* income of the assistant-, associate-, and full-professors is \$2,600.

Obviously, a research man can not work without data. Here special obstructions are met. It goes without saying that the doors to most private papers and collections are closed to black men. The same is largely true when it comes to public records. The state libraries follow a mixed policy. In Kentucky, for example, there is no interference. The more general practice is, as the Editor of the *Journal of Negro History* euphemistically puts it, to seat the Negro "somewhere in the building" and to bring to this place the materials he may wish. In other tax-supported libraries and those provided by philanthropy, the Negro is usually excluded. Sometimes use of the books, but not the building, is granted.

A stirring chapter could be written on the ingenious devices employed to gain access to the necessary books and documents. Ties of kinship are always useful. Often the old classmate in Harvard's "History 400," who may be teaching in the neighboring university, is helpful. The trick may be turned by a chain of letters to someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows the custodian. A good practice is to denounce a pro-Northern history book on the Civil War. The prize, no doubt, should go to the passionate devotee who entered into conspiracy with the Negro janitor (who alone knew the place of every book in the building). Every evening the required books were removed and returned early the next morning before the arrival of the political appointee (librarian).

SPECIAL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

There is, too, the outrage of downright vandalism. Any number of cases of the mysterious disappearance of source materials may be cited. In one of the largest cities of the South, the files of the Superintendent of Public Instruction during Reconstruction days were removed when it became known that a study was to be made of that administration. Dr. W. E. B. DuBois reports a similar

experience when a Negro professor planned to write an account of that highly efficient Jonathan C. Gibbs (Negro), Secretary of the State of Florida and Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1872–1874.

When it comes to the historical associations and other scientific or semi-scientific conclaves, their programs are arranged and executed without thought of the colored brother. This is not only true of the local or regional societies, but of important national associations which happen to convene in the South. Last February the Department of Superintendence of the National Education Association meeting in New Orleans (where there is, perhaps, less agonizing over the incidence of color than in any other Southern city) was so indifferent to deliberate discourtesy to Negro members that the Julius Rosenwald Fund in a vigorous letter of protest withdrew. Some were sufficiently interested to go through the back door of the freight entrance to attend the sessions in the hotel. The American Historical Association has on occasion allowed such men as Professor Monroe Work of Tuskegee to appear. On the other hand, when one member of the committee on programs and arrangements suggested the names of Dr. Carter G. Woodson and Dr. Charles W. Wesley (both Harvard Ph.D.'s and authors of several volumes), who happen to stem from a more aggressive tradition, the committee was immediately reshuffled and this member was promptly dropped.

The effects of these impediments to the intellectual life are manifest. Here may be found one reason, at least, for the interminable round of faculty members' wives' bridge parties and the absorption in campus politics. One man came to a Southern Negro college well known as the author of two highly creditable monographs. Today he is better known as the auction bridge champion of the region. Another was known to babble in his sleep of the French Revolution; now his nocturnal murmurings are more related to the last fraternity initiation.

A CHALLENGE TO SOUTHERN INTELLECTUALS

Across this darkness should be set the exceptions and what many like to believe are the rays of hope. Here and there, individuals may be found who go out of their way to aid in every manner possible. It is understood that professors, librarians, and other functionaries are not altogether free agents. The social environment is persuasive and persistent. In the light of custom and law a man is "experimenting" dangerously when he invites Negroes to use public facilities. Five instances are known where, informally and unofficially, Negro and white institutions exchange professors for certain classes. Dr. Guy B. Johnson is considered something of a wild-eyed radical because he has suggested a more general association of scholars irrespective of "race." In Chicago last December, some Southerners stated that they voted for Dr. Charles S. Johnson of Fisk when he was elected to one of the vice-presidencies of the American Sociological Society.

But when all this has been said and every instance of social intelligence has been recorded, it adds up (1) that the obstacles in the South to the un-"Uncle Tomish" Negro student are tremendous, and (2) that one of the most disconcerting of these is the indifference and occasional opposition of the white scholar. Without raising the question as to the obligation and necessity on the part of all thoughtful scholars to further the pursuit of learning, the conclusion can hardly be escaped that men who neglect to "universalize" their own problem by failing to include the more profound difficulties of their neighbors, have a flimsy basis to their appeal for "recognition and support."

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