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The PROGRESSIVE PARTY AND THE NEGRO

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At the Progressive convention held in Chicago last August disquieting rumors arose concerning the Negro delegates. It was stated that although two groups from Florida, one of colored men and one of white, had been excluded because of a doubt as to which had been authorized to elect delegates, that the colored men only from Mississippi had been excluded; and that this was done in spite of the fact that the word “white” had been inserted in the call for the State convention which elected the accredited delegates. It did not seem sufficient to many of us that the credentials committee in seating the Mississippi delegation had merely protested against the use of the word “white,” and some of us at once took alarm on behalf of the colored men.

With several others, who were also members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, I appeared before the resolutions committee to point out the inconsistency of pledging relief to the overburdened workman while leaving the colored man to struggle unaided with his difficult situation, if, indeed, the action of the credentials committee had not given him a setback.

In reply we were told that colored men were sitting as delegates in the convention, not only from such Northern States as Rhode Island, but that the Progressives of West Virginia, Maryland, Tennessee and Kentucky had also elected colored delegates, setting a standard which it was hoped the States south of them would attain when the matter was left to those men of the South who are impatient in the turmoil of war issues and old party alignments. It was pointed out that such are the limitations of local self-government that free political expression can only be secured to the colored man through the co-operative action of the patriotic and far-seeing citizens of the States in which he lives; that only when white men and colored men together engage upon common political problems will the colored man cease to be regarded as himself a problem. We were reminded that under so-called Republican protection the colored man has practically lost his vote in certain States, not only through the grandfather clause, but through sheer intimidation in those counties where the line of party cleavage follows the line of race antagonism, all the whites being Democrats who vote, all the blacks Republicans who do not. We were further told that if there was any disposition to continue old shams, that it would be a very simple matter to insert in the Progressive platform the glittering phrases which had done valiant service for so long a time, not only to blind the colored man himself, but to enable the manager of a Republican convention to determine the result through the colored vote. By the simple device of appointing to federal offices colored men in the sections where there is no Republican party, these men elect themselves delegates to the national conventions and naturally repay their party by voting as their office-holding interests require. Certainly self-government is not being promoted by such political recognition on the part of the Republicans of the North any more than it is by the disenfranchising action on the part of the Democrats of the South. The Progressive convention took neither point of view and challenged one and at the same time the traditional shibboleths of both parties.

When I asked myself most searchingly whether my Abolitionist father would have remained in any political convention in which colored men had been treated slightingly, I recalled an incident of my girlhood which was illuminating and somewhat comforting. I had given my father an explanation of a stupid decision whereby I had succeeded in bungling the plans of a large family party, and I ended my apology with the honest statement that I had tried to act upon what I thought his judgment would have been. His expression of amused bewilderment changed to one of understanding as he replied: “That probably accounts for your confusion of mind. You fell into the easy mistake of substituting loyalty and dependence upon another’s judgment for the very best use of your own faculties. I should be sorry to think that you were always going to complicate moral situations, already sufficiently difficult, by trying to work out
another's point of view. You will do much better if you look the situation fairly in the face with the best light you have."

Certainly the Abolitionists followed the best light they had, although it differed from that possessed by the framers of the Constitution, whose light had also come from the eighteenth century doctrines of natural rights and of abstract principles, when ideas were pressed up to their remotest logical issues, without much reference to the conditions to which they were applied. Shall we be less fearless than they to follow our own moral ideals formed under the influence of new knowledge, even, although the notion of evolution has entered into social history and politics, and although "abstract" in the tongue of William James, has come to imply the factitious, the academic, and even the futile?

We all believe that a wide extension of political power is the only sound basis of self-government and that no man is good enough to vote for another, but we surely do not become mere opportunists when we try to know something of the process by which the opinion of the voter has been influenced and his vote secured. If it is done through bribery, we easily admit that the whole system of representative government has broken down, and we are not accounted to have lost our patriotism when we estimate how much of a given vote is due to the liquor interests or to manufactured opinion; only on the political status of the colored man is it still considered unpatriotic to judge, save as one who long ago made up his mind.

Even in that remarkable convention where, for the moment, individual isolation was dissolved into a larger consciousness and where we caught a hint of the action of "the collective mind," so often spoken of and so seldom apprehended, I was assailed by the old familiar discomfort concerning the status of the colored man. Had I felt any better about it, I speculated, when I had tried in vain for three consecutive years to have the question discussed by a great national association to whose purposes such a discussion was certainly germane? Was I more dissatisfied with this action than I had often been with no action at all? I was foreboded to acknowledge to myself that certainly war on behalf of the political status of the colored man was clearly impossible, but that there might emerge from such federal action as the interference with peonage, perhaps, a system of federal arbitration in interracial difficulties, somewhat analogous to the function of the Hague tribunal in international affairs. In fact, it has already been discovered at the Hague that many difficulties formerly called international were in reality Interracial. Through such federal arbitration it may in time be demonstrated that to secure fair play between races living in the same nation is as legitimate as it is when irrational race hatred breaks out on those fringes of empire which the Hague calls "spheres of influence." The action of the Progressive party had at least taken the color question away from sectionalism and put it in a national setting which might clear the way for a larger perspective. Possibly this is all we can do at the present moment.

Viewing the third-party movement as a consistent, practical effort toward the "barn raising of a new party in the nation," which in its organization and program should not be along the old Civil War cleavages, we can predict but one outcome. The issues were those of political democracy and industrial justice—a merging of the political insurgency in the West and country districts with the social insurgency of the cities. Imbedded in this new movement is a strong ethical motive, and once the movement is crystallized, once as a body of people it gets a national foothold, once as a propaganda the rank and file are transfused with the full scope and meaning of social justice, it is bound to lift this question of the races, as all other questions, out of the grip of the past and into a new era of solution.