

Wilkerson

ON THE CONCEPT "NEGRO"

(Digest of a report presented by Doxey A. Wilkerson as a basis for discussion at the Preliminary Conference on Race Theories, Jefferson School of Social Science, September 22, 1951)

What the term "Negro" means and what population groups may properly be called "Negro" would seem to be a simple matter clearly understood by most every man-on-the-street. The fact is, however, that the term "Negro" is currently used with fundamentally divergent meanings, and is applied with questionable accuracy to many diverse population groups in the United States, Latin America, West Indies, Africa and elsewhere.

It is important theoretically and politically to define the concept "Negro" with scientific precision, and to bring current usage into line with such definition. This analysis is presented as a basis of discussion leading toward that end.

I. Confusion in Current Usage

The term "Negro" is variously used as designating (1) a so-called "race", (2) a "people" or "nation"; and (3) by many people it is rejected all together.

Negro as "Race":

The most prevalent usage conceives the term "Negro" as designating a biological category, a "race" of human beings with common immediate or remote ancestry in Africa. New Century Dictionary, for example, defines "Negro" as "a black person"; "a member of the negro (sic.) or black race (sometimes cap.).". The definition continues:

"Noting or pertaining to the so-called 'black' race, characterized chiefly by black complexion, short, broad and flat nose, projecting jaws, thick lips, and crisp wooly hair, and generally regarded as embracing the native inhabitants of the (African) Sudan, Senegambia, and the region southward to the vicinity of the equator, and their descendants elsewhere, but sometimes considered to include also many of the African tribes further south."

The Encyclopedia Britannica conceives the "American Negro" as "a new race a new biological and cultural product a 'race' which is a mixture of races."

The 30 states which have passed laws prohibiting Negro-white marriage use various statutory definitions, including "any Negro," "one-sixteenth," or "one-eighth," or "one-fourth," or "one drop of Negro blood."¹ (One might point out the internal inconsistency of such definitions; for if the Negro is a "race" determined by "blood", then "one-eighth Negro blood" would make, not a "Negro", but a "one-eighth-Negro" -- a consideration somehow ignored in "racial" laws and social custom.)

¹ Otto Kleinberg, Characteristics of the American Negro, pp. 360-62.

24-39-37

The United States Bureau of the Census tends toward the "one drop of Negro blood" concept, instructing enumerators:

"A person with mixed white or Negro blood should be returned as a Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood. Both black and mulatto persons are to be returned as Negroes." ²

24-39-38
Myrdal's An American Dilemma, with characteristic double-talk, says, "The 'Negro race' is defined in America by white people . . . in terms of parentage. Everybody having a known trace of Negro blood in his veins -- no matter how far back it was acquired -- is classified as a Negro", and then adds: "The definition of the 'Negro race' is thus a social and conventional, not a biological, concept." ³

These varied attempts at defining the concept "Negro" are all based on the premise of race. They reflect the most widespread current usage, among Negroes as well as among white persons. ⁴

Negro as "People" or "Nation":

Among progressives, who reject the concept of "race" as scientifically unsound and politically reactionary, the term "Negro" is generally used as designating a "people" or a "nation". Yet, even here, the term is used with confusing vagueness and looseness. Two illustrations should suffice.

Du Bois, in Black Folk -- Then and Now, seems to reject the concept of "Negro" as a biological category, asserting: "It is generally recognized that no scientific definition of race is possible"; and further: "Assuming prehistoric man . . . as having developed in historic times into three main stocks (i.e. Caucasian, Negroid and Mongoloid), we find all of these stocks represented in Africa and for the most part inextricably intermingled." Yet his concept of "Negro", defined as a "people", still makes concessions to the biological-race point of view:

"It is reasonable, according to fact and historic usage, to include under the word 'Negro' the darker peoples of Africa characterized by a brown skin, curled hair, some tendency to a development of the maxillary parts of the face, and a dolichocephalic head."

Moreover, as in his discussion of "the future relation of the Negro peoples to the rest of the world", Du Bois equates "Negro" with "black folk" (as compared with "other human races"), and makes it clear that the population groups to which he refers are to be found in Africa, the West Indies, South America and the United States. ⁵

² Florence Murray, The Negro Handbook: 1946-47, p. 1.

³ pp. 113, 115.

⁴ Incidentally, as was pointed out at the Preliminary Conference, the term "white person" also reflects a racial point of view.

⁵ pp. 1-4: 367

24-39-39

With similar global use of the term "Negro", Foster's Outline Political History of the Americas estimates that there are "about 45 million Negroes and Mullettoes" in the Americas, stating:

"The Negroes are to be found mainly in three big areas: the United States, 15 million; Brazil, 13 million; and the West Indies and Caribbean countries, 12 million The predominantly Negro and Mulatto countries are Haiti, Martinique, Jamaica, and various other West Indian islands, where they average from 75 to 90 per cent of the populations." 16

Thus, among progressives who explicitly denounce the "race" hypothesis, the term "Negro" is used, with implicit "racial" meanings, to include practically all darker peoples with immediate or remote African ancestry.

Rejection of the Term "Negro":

There is also the point of view, embraced by many thousands of Negroes in the United States, that the term "Negro" should be rejected all together; that most Negroes are not "black" as the linguistic origins of the term denote; and that Negroes in this country certainly are not Africans, to whom presumably the term might be applied; and further, that "to call ourselves 'Negroes' is to Jim-Crow ourselves; we're Americans, and let's call ourselves 'Americans'." It is in response to this point of view that one of the large Negro newspapers, Afro-American, has for more than a decade refused ever to use the term "Negro", substituting such descriptive terms as "colored" and "tan".

Among the African peoples, likewise, there are many who reject the term "Negro", insisting that they be referred to by their respective national or tribal designations. Illustrative are these excerpts from a letter to The Compass by the editor of an Ethiopian newspaper:

" . . . In Ethiopia, it is anathema for anyone to call any of the people, regardless of their color, 'Negro' . . .

"In Bantu Africa, the people resent the name and question why the most enterprising and intelligent group of people of African descent living in the most advanced part of the western world should accept to be called by a name, nothing but a derogatory tag, attached to them by others. This is true in many parts of Africa . . .

"If the word 'Negro' is an ethnological myth, then the laudable commemoration of 'Negro History Week' does not exist in truth and fact. Such an observance only strengthens the attitude of the alarmingly large number of the majority, and blocks the way to a fair and impartial evaluation of the contributions of the Afro-Americans to United States progress and civilization." 17

Thus, in current usage the term "Negro" designates a so-called "race" with presumed common biological heritage; it refers to various "peoples" of even remote African ancestry all over the world; and it is rejected all together as an "ethnological myth."

What, precisely, does the term mean? On what basis can a scientific definition be formulated?

II. A Sociological Concept, Not Biological

Any scientific definition of "Negro" must reject all biological or "racial" meanings, and recognize that the term can properly be understood only as a sociological concept.

Fallacy of "Negro Race":

Other reports to this Preliminary Conference have pointed out the basic fallacy of all "racial" (i.e. biological) classifications of the peoples of the world; that "there are no Races of Mankind."

As regards the Negro in the United States, there is a long history of utterly futile "scientific" efforts to define "Negro" as a "race", on the basis of common biological heritage -- the only sense in which "race" can be presumed to have scientific meaning. As indices of biological heritage, anthropologists have utilized such physical characteristics as skin color, eye color, hair texture, head shape, size and structure of the brain, body structures, etc. All their "scientific" efforts have failed. There is no single physical index or combination of physical indices which suffices to distinguish reliably between "Negro" and "non-Negro".

Paul Robeson and Walter White, for example, are both Negroes; yet it is apparent that they stem from widely divergent biological stocks, as reflected by their markedly contrasting physical characteristics. There is no conceivable "racial" (i.e. biological) definition which would group White and Robeson together as "Negroes."

Progressive scientists are coming to recognize, of course, that the whole "race" concept is a theoretical monstrosity, based on the most inconsequential of physical characteristics which provide no reliable basis even for classifying the so-called "races". The term "race" has no meaning and should be abandoned.

It follows that there is no such thing as a "Negro race" -- anywhere in the world. The term should be expunged completely from our vocabularies.

"Negro" a Valid Concept:

This negation of the meaningless concept "Negro race" affords no comfort for that wierd and militant cult among Negroes -- including some Negro progressives -- who would have us abolish the term "Negro" all together, on the ground that there is no such thing. There are Negroes in our society, nihilist denials to the contrary notwithstanding; and this social reality will not yield to semantic pressures.

24-39-40

One can well understand the escapist tendencies to which Jim Crow oppression gives rise among a small minority of the Negro people, tendencies which find expression in "passing", in "integrationism", and even in the absurd and contradictory self-denial of those who say: "Let's call ourselves something else".

Those who reject the term "Negro" as "nothing but a derogatory tag" would do well to understand that the white chauvinist indignities and oppression they seek to escape cannot be abolished by linguistic manipulation. Somewhat like the proverbial rose, a Negro by any other name will be Jim Crowed just the same.

24-39-41
The derogation which our chauvinist society tries to attach to the term "Negro" is based upon and designed to preserve the billions of dollars in super profits which United States imperialism garners each year out of the wholesale oppression of the Negro people. The objectionable connotations of the term "Negro" will be destroyed only with the destruction of Jim Crow oppression itself -- when the Negro people achieve their historic goal of full equality and dignity in our society. It is along this path -- not in the foolish effort to change social reality by dropping a word -- that militant struggles against white chauvinism must be directed.

The real issue, then, is not whether the concept "Negro" is valid; but what does it mean? If the term lacks meaning as a biological concept (i.e. a "race") on what basis of reality does its validity rest?

"Negro" as a Sociological Concept:

Approached as a sociological concept, the term "Negro" has meaning and is amenable to precise definition. In such an approach, what makes a "Negro" is conceived, not in terms of supposed correspondence of "genes", but rather in terms of actual correspondence of social experience. Thus "Negro" is conceived as designating a definite social group -- the product of history and of social development.

For example, although Walter White and Paul Robeson cannot be classified as "Negroes" on the basis of biological heritage, they can be -- and are -- so grouped together on the basis of common membership in a social group in the United States which is historically and currently designated as "Negro". They view themselves as Negroes; they are viewed by others as Negroes; they move in the society and are generally accepted as Negroes; they are Negroes and whatever may be their biological heritage has nothing to do with it.

What is the basis of this classification of White and Robeson and other U. S. Negroes as a distinct social group? The answer lies in more than three centuries of common experiences and struggles against common oppression.

The African tribesmen who were brought to this land and enslaved came from widely divergent cultures, spoke different languages, and represented quite discrete social groups. Their descendants in the United States -- through long association imposed by their oppressors, through communication on the basis of a newly acquired language, through shared experiences in a common economic and social setting -- have developed strong and abiding psychological bonds of unity. They have developed into a stable and cohesive social group, with a pronounced sense of "belongingness." They share common (and in many important respects peculiar) sentiments, aspirations, feelings and attitudes, which find reflection in their day-to-day conversations, music, literature and other forms of art.

24-39-42

In short, that population group in the United States historically designated by the term "Negro", as the result of more than three centuries of common experience, has been welded together as a distinct national group -- a people, the "Negro people"; and in the Black Belt area of their majority, they constitute an oppressed "Negro nation". Paul Robeson and Walter White and all other U.S. Negroes are properly classified together solely because they are an integral part of this historically evolved, stable national group, a part of the "Negro people" -- and on this basis alone.

A skeptic might argue: But what we call "Negroes" do have some degree of African ancestry in common; and even though not the decisive basis of classification, it is an essential factor in the concept "Negro". He might "test" the point of view here developed by posing the questions: Could a person of African ancestry become a "white person"? Could a white person become a "Negro"?

The answer to both questions is "yes". Although national ties are tough and abiding in the case of Negroes as with other nations, there are in our country many thousands of persons of very remote African ancestry who, over a life-time or even generations of "passing", have come to be completely isolated from the Negro people -- socially and psychologically. They may not even be aware of their meager African ancestry. They view themselves as white persons; they are viewed by others as white; they move in the society and are generally accepted as white; they are white -- and whatever may be their biological heritage has nothing to do with it.

Similarly, a "white" person, especially a very young child, who is brought up as a "Negro", whose home, school and community experiences over a long period of time all serve to integrate him fully as a part of the Negro people, both socially and psychologically; such a person is a Negro -- and his biological heritage has nothing to do with it.

Were I to venture a definition of the concept "Negro", it would include nothing whatever about "race", physical characteristics, or African origin. It would run something like this: A "Negro" is a person who shares the common psychological make-up of the Negro people of the United States, who views himself as belonging to the Negro people of the United States (even though he may indulge in nihilist and escapist denial of the term "Negro"), and who moves in the society and is fully accepted as an integral part of the Negro people of the United States.

III. A Narrowly Restricted Concept

The definition of "Negro" ventured above deliberately restricts the concept to the Negro people of the United States. It takes issue, therefore, with common usage which designates various peoples outside the United States as "Negroes".

Africans Not "Negroes":

The inhabitants of Africa do not constitute a homogeneous social entity -- nor did they at the time of the European invasions. There were, and are, many different tribes and nationalities and nations in Africa, representing different levels of social development, and all with their own languages, psychological make-ups and cultures. Some of them -- as in Nigeria and the Gold Coast in West Africa -- are developed nations already consciously struggling for the right of self determination.

If we were to group all these varied peoples together simply as "Africans", and nothing more, we would thereby blur over what is of most significance about them -- the fact that they constitute separate and distinct peoples. If we were to classify them as "Negroes", we would thereby affirm the wholly unscientific, untenable and mystical category of "race" as the basis of classification.

Thus, the Ethiopian editor who wrote to The Compass was correct in rejecting the term "Negro" as applied to his and other African peoples; although he erred in denying the term's validity as designating Negroes in the United States.

The peoples of Africa are not Negroes. They should be referred to by their respective national and tribal names, which alone have real social and political significance.

West Indians Not "Negroes":

The island peoples of the West Indies, most of whom have African ancestry, do not thereby constitute a homogeneous social group. Some are British in their national orientation, some French, some Dutch; and many of these are evolving toward their own distinct nationhood on the basis of long association in a common territory, with a common language in a common economy, and with the consequent development of a common psychological make-up, reflected in a common culture.

If we were to group these varied West Indian peoples together as "Negroes," we would thereby lose sight of the truly significant frame of reference -- their development as distinct nationalities and nations. Moreover, any such over-all classification could have no basis other than the untenable hypothesis of a common "race," presumably stemming from a common African ancestry.

Two students of mine from Trinidad report that their countrymen do not refer to themselves as "Negroes", but rather as "West Indians"; that the only population differentiation commonly made is for the "white" minority. Immigrants from the West Indies generally resent being called "Negroes" in this country -- until after a long process of assimilation they tend, in fact, to become an integral part of the Negro people of the United States.

These usages are correct. The several West Indian peoples are not Negroes. They should be referred to by their own respective national designations.

Latin Americans Not Negroes:

As in the case of the peoples of Africa and the West Indies, the peoples of African descent in Latin America are integral parts of their respective nations; and, with one or two possible minor exceptions, they may not correctly be designated as "Negroes."

A Puerto Rican, for example, in his own country or in the United States, properly objects to being called a "Negro". Even though his ancestry may be overwhelmingly African, that fact is of no significance whatever; the truly important influence which shapes his personality and allegiance, the meaningful frame of reference in which he must be viewed, is that of his nation, Puerto Rico.

24-39-43

So it is with the other peoples of African ancestry in Latin America. They constitute, with minor exceptions, integral parts of their respective nations. They are correctly designated, therefore, not as "Negroes", but as Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Brazilians, Haitians, and the like.

24-39-44
The possible minor exceptions to this point of view would involve truly national developments among peoples of African ancestry in Latin American countries which are parallel to the development of the Negro people of the United States. There are said to be such parallel developments in parts of Cuba, and to a lesser extent also in Brazil --- where, chiefly in local areas, there has been the historic oppression of persons with substantial African heritage, where white chauvinism has prevented the assimilation of such persons into the nation as a whole, and where, over the centuries, there has developed a distinct nationality within the over-all nation --- sometimes designating itself by the term "Negro".

There is need for full investigation and documentation of any such parallel national developments in Cuba and Brazil, or elsewhere. Whatever such further inquiry might reveal, two things are now clear: (1) there are no such developments which even closely approximate the level of national development of the Negro people of the United States; and (2) the term "Negro" cannot properly be applied in such cases in the over-all sense of grouping together all peoples of African ancestry; it can be used correctly only to designate these particular national developments (e.g. "Cuban Negro", "Brazilian Negro"), which parallel --- but are not a part of --- the national development that produced the Negro people of the United States.

IV. Summary and Conclusion

Thus, the concept "Negro race" must be rejected as unscientific and meaningless. The term "Negro" should be understood as a sociological concept, designating a particular national development --- chiefly (if not exclusively) the Negro people of the United States. It is incorrect, therefore, to use the term "Negro" as an over-all category designating diverse peoples in Africa and of African descent in the West Indies and Latin America. Such peoples are correctly referred to by their historic tribal and national designations.

It should be noted that this restricted conception of the term "Negro" does not deny or in any way diminish the very real and politically important bonds of sympathy among "colored peoples" throughout the world, especially among those of immediate and remote African ancestry. Such loose international identification of "colored peoples" with one another stems primarily from their common struggles against imperialist oppression; it should be encouraged and strengthened. This fact does not, however, justify a loose, "racial", misleading global usage of the term "Negro", which correctly applies to a particular national development in the United States (and possibly to parallel developments in a few Latin American countries).

This point of view on the concept "Negro", here advanced as a basis of discussion, would seem to have the merits of theoretical soundness and precision. Its general acceptance would help clear away the looseness and confusion which now characterize current usage of the term "Negro".

Further inquiry and discussion on this question are important for at least three reasons: (1) to fill in gaps in our factual information; (2) to achieve general theoretical clarity; and (3) thereby to lay the basis for effective "practical" work in our approach to the national question in Africa and in the Americas.

#####