

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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A Matter of Prejudice

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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The people of the Andean countries sometimes wonder if the United States fulfills the role it has cast for itself as salesman of social democracy. Particularly, they regard the treatment of minority groups with suspicion, asserting that prejudice doesn't fit well with the social equality advertised by this country. They often sum up their attitudes in this matter with one short question, "Well, and what about the negro in the United States?"

The paradox of this question - which unfairly tests a part to judge the whole - is that the Andean indian is brusquely discriminated against in a way which might shock many pro-segregation southerners, and he is assigned a place in the total social structure reminiscent of the negro's in the south of the United States. This prevents no one, however, from raising the question, and concluding that Americans are hypocritical at worst, confused at best.

It was the third week of a dry spell in northern Ecuador. The sky was a soiled gray sheet, promising but not giving rain, and dust scummed even breakfast coffee. In the main plaza of the town, men stood idly, as if waiting for water to fall to give them energy. A truck coughed and jerked its way down the road from Quito and all heads turned to watch its arrival. The grinning driver circled the square and braked hard so that more dust settled over the passengers riding in the back, already filmed with the fine powder. The driver's assistant threw a bundle of newspapers to a waiting boy and movement returned to the scene as the copies were distributed and read.

A local Communist with whom I had been talking hurried back with a newspaper shaking in his thin hand. "So, so, your country's done it again." His narrow brown face was quivering in anger. "They won't let a negro enter the university." He slapped the article in question for emphasis, nearly knocking the paper from his hand which only made him angrier. I realized that we'd never again have any pleasant talks - political or otherwise - over morning coffee.

At that moment, in his stained felt hat, loose double breasted jacket and baggy soiled trousers, he was Autherine Lucy and I was all callous gringos.

This man, a mestizo, resentful of his poverty and of the casual disregard shown him by "whites," was convinced that only Communism promised alleviation to him and his kind. With the fury of the righteous, he criticized every event relating to the United States which could possibly be thought of as showing a defect. He identified himself with all the dispossessed of the world and took the "white" man as the villain of the piece, concentrating especially on the United States with its long history of interference in Latin American life. After venting some of his spleen elsewhere, he later told me that the United States couldn't hope to stand for "democracy" unless it solved the Negro Problem.

Two thousand miles away, in a Peruvian hacienda buried deep in the winds and barrenness of the high mountains, this statement was echoed by the owner. He asked, "Don't you think that your country is faced with a problem as difficult as our indian one - with the negro, I mean?"

After we had pulled our scarves tighter and buttoned our coats against the chill of the dining room, he explained his conception of the American negro. He thought the black leads an inferior life because he can't measure up to the demands of "modern civilization"; that he is passive and little concerned with his own fate by some inescapable racial choice; that he is crude, governed by passion (especially sexual) and violent in his manners and morals within his group. On this basis, he could be compared directly with the Andean indian, and the owner wondered why so much criticism originated in the States over the Peruvians' treatment of the indian when we seemed to be doing much the same thing to the negro.

Later, he cited an experience he had had with an agricultural technician from Alabama who had visited the hacienda. The American chided him for his opinion that the indians who worked the property were perfectly content as is and intrinsically incapable of doing anything else. The owner brought up the issue of the negro in Alabama, and the technician replied, "But, that isn't the same thing at all." The Peruvian's comment was - and is -, "But, why isn't it?"

The hacendado thinks of himself as a reasonable man, content with the system which divides whites, mestizos and indians into

separate and unequal groups. Occasionally, he feels that this is unjust for the indians are cheated of education, sanitation and the like. But his sense of wrongness doesn't extend to any desire to alter the given social topography, although he sees no reason for excluding some amenities (in the form of a school, for example) from the indian's life.

He concluded by saying, "I was raised on the idea that the indian is half a man, and running the hacienda hasn't changed my mind on this. Writers on the equality of man's rights haven't convinced me that they are talking about this indian on this farm. As a matter of fact, the technician used this argument in explaining Alabama to me, so I'm certainly not alone in believing as I do."

Santa Cruz in Bolivia is a frontier town, isolated from much contact with other regions until the opening of a highway from Cochabamba. It is noted from the beauty of its women and the general lack of indian blood in the population - "Pure Castile," was one man's tribute to it. Except when a south wind blows, it is warm; smug in being the center of a fertile farming area, cheerful and gregarious. The openness of the townspeople may come from the sense of freedom the plains around it give: there is none of the cramped, tight feeling common in mountain towns.

The son of a local and wealthy farmer offered to guide me about when I first arrived, and did so with great enthusiasm. He was in love with Santa Cruz and saw in it a magnificent future. He did point out the renowned and pretty women but denied the other bit of lore: many of the people had darkish skins, although there seemed to be more fair men and women than elsewhere in Bolivia.

"A real white man's paradise anyway," he said one day, and seemed ready to elaborate on this theme for some time, but instead he said, "But, I imagine that your definition of a white man is different from mine. All these dark skins wouldn't go in the United States - people would think we were negroes." I asked if this mattered. "Yes, it does. I'd like to see the States, but I don't intend to be looked at oddly because my face isn't white as flour. Personally, I'm going back to Europe next year - nobody cares there."

In spite of this, he was a partisan of things U.S. He preferred to buy goods manufactured there, and read tirelessly about the country. He was also overly hospitable in his reception of visiting Americans. Nonetheless, as an individual he refused to expose himself to what he took to be a widespread habit among Americans to devalue a man if he wasn't white as snow. And, like many

others, he faithfully followed the history of prejudice and segregation in the States as it appeared in local - and by no means sympathetic - newspapers.

In Cartagena, on the Caribbean Sea, the population is as wild a mixture of genetic strains as could be imagined. There is a high proportion of negro blood circulating in these tropical Colombians, but it is no more an issue among them than indian blood is in New England.

In a darkened office with the blinds half drawn to bar the powerful sunlight, I was talking with a pediatrician, half negro, half white. His skin was nearly black under heavily crinkled hair, and he gestured restlessly as he spoke. He was telling me of his projected year of study in the United States.

"For awhile, I thought I was going to have to take a fellowship in the southern part of the States - no one on the selection board realized just how negro I look. Luckily, I got one for the north instead. Can't you imagine me trying to adjust to a segregation situation? Even with a Colombian passport? I wonder if your government knows how much face you lose in places like Cartagena because of how you treat the negro."

These and other experiences underline the basic criticism which the Andean Latin levels at the United States: that our own record must be unimpeachable in these matters before we take other nations to task for discrimination. The Andean reacts strongly when he hears an American suggesting that the indian is the victim of a vicious prejudice and that this is one of the "great defects" of Andean America. Such an approach seems false as the Latin follows the development of white-negro relations in the States.

Behind this is a personal resentment that the issue should apparently be based on skin color. The Bolivian, Peruvian, Ecuadorian and Colombian is more often than not darker skinned than the U.S. American, and he is apt to feel that we regard him as somehow inferior because of this.

These people point out that in their countries there is no such thing as a color bar: that no man is thought innately inferior because of the shade of his skin. This is at first hard to accept since the darker a man's skin in the Andes the lower his status. On analysis, however, this argument turns out to be reasonably accurate.

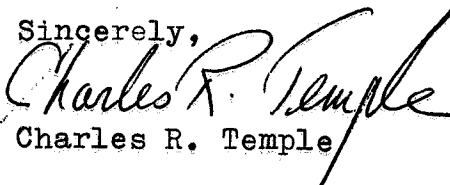
The case for a lack of color bar usually runs like this. When the Spaniards first settled the Andes, they had not long since celebrated the victory of Ferdinand and Isabella over the last of the Moslem strongholds in Spain. The Moslem occupation had lasted for nearly eight centuries, and during that time the Spaniards were the barbarians as opposed to the cultured, highly civilized peoples from North Africa and other parts of the Arab world. The important point about these people is that they had dark skins but high status with relation to the Spaniards, and it was not uncommon that the two groups interbred. Out of this situation, the Spaniard imbibed a predisposition to ignore color as the major basis for reckoning a man's quality.

In the New World, the Spaniards overcame the indian and put him to work. They also had children by his women. Few families in the Andes can boast of unmixed blood. The social system that was created took its measurements from other criteria than the biological: principally, that the indian was the worker and therefore inferior. The color of his skin was an incidental factor.

Whatever the final validity of this assertion, the fact remains that the people of the Andes think it is true. In turn, it reinforces their distrust of the United States' stand on "democracy" in general and is extended to such things as our arguments against authoritarian governments or for labor unions - both important issues in the Andes on which the local stand is apt to be opposed to ours.

Perhaps worst of all, they become freely cynical about the United States' "goodwill" and "good intentions," and slide easily into a pernicious anti-Americanism.

Sincerely,



Charles R. Temple