

From Plantation to Ghetto

Third Edition

August Meier and Elliott Rudwick



TO GHETTO

THIRD EDITION



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FROM PLANTATION

by AUGUST MEIER
and ELLIOTT RUDWICK

From Plantation to Ghetto

For ROBERT CURVIN
AND LOUIS R. HARLAN

Preface

IN THIS BOOK we have attempted an analytical, interpretive, and interdisciplinary history rather than a narrative account. We have assumed that the reader will have a knowledge of the facts of American history and we have focused less on what whites were doing about blacks than on what Negroes themselves were doing. Moreover, certain topics have been omitted altogether, and special emphasis has been placed on ideologies, institutional developments, patterns of interracial violence, and protest movements.

Gloria Marshall of the anthropology department of the University of Michigan very carefully read and criticized the first chapter, which greatly benefited from her suggestions. William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease of the history department at the University of Maine kindly let us have a copy of their paper, "Antislavery Ambivalence: Immediatism, Expediency, and Race," prior to its publication. James M. McPherson of the history department at Princeton University very generously went through his notes and supplied us with data on black participation in the abolitionist movement from 1861 to 1870. In the preparation of the final chapter of this new edition we were greatly indebted to Alex Poinsett, senior editor at *Ebony* magazine, for an illuminating interview and for permitting us to see his unpublished manuscript on black politics. The discussion of interracial violence during Reconstruction owes much to the research of two graduate students of ours, Melinda Martin Hennessey and the late Gerald T. Martin.

We wish to thank Professor Robert Curvin of the political

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From Plantation to Ghetto

I

The West African Heritage and Afro-American History

THE BLACK EXPERIENCE in the United States has been largely shaped by two contrasting environments. The first was the Southern staple-producing farm and plantation, on which the vast majority of pre-twentieth-century Negroes worked, in the beginning as slaves and later as sharecroppers. The second was the urban ghetto, predominantly a twentieth-century creation, which grew primarily as a consequence of the migration of rural Negroes to the cities of the South and North.

Thus black life and culture in America have developed within the context of a subordinate status whose leading institutional manifestations have been the plantation and the ghetto. Within these two environments, created by a dominant majority, blacks have both assimilated the culture of the whites and developed what is widely regarded as a distinct, though loosely

defined, subculture. On the one hand, Negroes adopted the egalitarian values of the American democratic creed and the middle-class values regarding wealth and upward mobility; on the other hand, their ideologies and institutions differed from those of the whites because blacks had to cope with the reality that democracy, economic opportunity, and social acceptance were not extended to them.

Wishing to be fully accepted as American citizens, yet alienated from the larger society, Negroes have been looked upon, and have looked upon themselves, as a separate ethnic group within that society. One facet of this ethnocentrism has been an awareness that exclusion from the mainstream of American life was related to their African origin.

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What the African background has meant for blacks in the United States can be discussed under two major categories. One is an analysis of the ways in which American blacks have perceived and felt about Africa. The other is an investigation of the degree to which the distinctive aspects of the American Negro subculture may in part be derived from African ways of life.

Over the years black Americans have displayed a broad range of views and attitudes about Africa, many of them laden with considerable ambivalence. Race prejudice and discrimination compelled Negroes to identify themselves as being of African descent, yet because the white conceptions of black inferiority and African savagery were absorbed by many Negroes, they displayed embarrassment over the allegedly primitive culture of the ancestral continent. At one extreme was the tiny handful of individuals who said that as Americans they had no more interest in Africa than they had in any other foreign land. At the other extreme was the minority—at times a substantial one—who rejected completely the possibility of achieving a satisfactory existence in the United States and advocated colonization, or the return of black Americans to the African homeland. Between these there was a broad spectrum of opinions. Practi-

cally universal among articulate nineteenth-century blacks was a pride in the accomplishments of ancient Africa, particularly Egypt. Equally universal was the view of contemporary Africa as heathen and savage. But it was generally believed that Afro-Americans, supposedly the most civilized portion of the black race, had a special duty and responsibility to assist in the uplift and moral and spiritual redemption of the homeland. Some thought of commercial ventures as playing a part in this mission, but for the most part the stress was on the role that Negro churches should play in sending missionaries to civilize and Christianize the allegedly immoral, primitive, and idolatrous inhabitants of Africa. Exclusively nationalist sentiments, looking toward the establishment of a new national homeland in Africa for oppressed black Americans, were less commonly held but, nevertheless, existed throughout the history of Negroes in America and, at certain times, flowered into highly significant and dramatic movements. From time to time eminent black intellectuals have espoused colonization or emigration; yet its chief appeal has been to the poorest class of blacks—the group which has been the most alienated from society and, therefore, the group most likely to identify with Africa.

Such was the range of views among nineteenth-century Afro-Americans. They had wide currency until the present generation. But as early as the turn of the century, W. E. B. Du Bois, the sociologist, historian, and noted protest leader, enunciated a new approach. Possessed of a deep emotional commitment to Africa and people of color throughout the world, Du Bois was probably the first American Negro to express the idea of Pan-Africanism: the belief that all people of African descent had common interests and should work together in the struggle for their freedom. He also appears to have been the first American author to describe the great medieval kingdoms of West Africa, and he was among the first to regard the nonliterate societies of sub-Saharan Africa as possessing complex and sophisticated cultures. Finally, he was apparently the first person to suggest that the culture of black Americans had been substantially influenced by the cultures of Africa.

Du Bois was well versed in the literature produced by European explorers and historians. His early writings on Africa were thoroughly imbued with the new knowledge that was a by-product of European penetration and conquest of the African interior in the late nineteenth century. Since then, historians and anthropologists have added greatly to and refined our knowledge of African history and culture. It took time, however, for Du Bois's picture to spread, even among Negroes. Although Carter G. Woodson, the influential scholar and propagandist for the study of the Negro's past and the founder of the *Journal of Negro History*, expressed similar ideas, few indeed accepted Du Bois's suggestion that American Negro culture owed much to the African way of life. Du Bois's views on this subject were based more on mystical yearnings than on hard factual data; it was not until Melville J. Herskovits in 1941 published his *Myth of the Negro Past*, based on extensive empirical research, that the thesis became widely debated.

The title of Herskovits's book suggests very well the viewpoint, not only of whites, but also—until very recent decades—of most blacks regarding the African past. Ordinarily when blacks expressed pride in Africa they pointed to the antique past. The myth that Du Bois, Woodson, and Herskovits were bent on destroying was a dual one: (1) that the ancestral cultures of the black Americans were primitive, with Africans making no contributions to the culture of the world; and (2) that under the slave regime practically all evidence of African culture—except perhaps for some survivals in music and dance—had been destroyed.

Having set forth the myth, let us now turn to a brief presentation of some of the salient facts.

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Africa south of the Sahara was known to medieval Muslims as the *Beled es-Sudan*, or "Land of the Blacks." Today the term "Sudan" is restricted to the broad belt of grassland lying south of the Sahara and north of the tropical rain forest that occupies the Guinea Coast and the Congo River Basin. The peoples who

became the chief source of the Negro population in the New World resided in the forested area and in the southern portions of the western Sudan. The chief theater of operation for the transatlantic slave trade was along the West African coast between Senegal and Angola. Some slaves came from deep in the interior, but ordinarily the range of the slave trade lay within three hundred miles of the coast. Thus the great majority of Negroes who were brought to the New World came primarily from the area drained by the Senegal, Gambia, Volta, Niger, and Congo Rivers.

The theater of much of the Sudanese cultural history that we are about to relate was actually located to the north of the area from which New World Negroes came. Yet we cannot separate the history of the southern Sudan from that of the northern Sudan. Moreover, the institutions of the Sudanese societies had important influences on the societies of the Guinea Coast, and some of the most important slave-trading kingdoms encompassed territory in both the rain forest and the Sudan. It therefore seems appropriate to begin the story of the American Negro's African heritage with a brief sketch of the cultural history of the western Sudan.

Modern scholarship places the western Sudan among the important creative centers in the development of human culture—along with the ancient Near East, the Indus and Yellow River valleys, and Mesoamerica. In each of these places an unusually high agricultural productivity achieved during the Neolithic period sustained a relatively dense population and thus ultimately led to a profound transformation in social institutions. In each case the social complexities arising out of the increasing number of inhabitants resulted in the development of social classes, urban centers, and despotic theocratic monarchies.

The importance of the domestication of plants and animals as a catalyst for these institutional changes cannot be overestimated. It is possible that, as the anthropologist George Peter Murdock has suggested, the western Sudan was among those centers in which agriculture was an indigenous invention, thus duplicating the achievement of the inhabitants of Southwest