

*Authors' Preface*  
*to the 1962 Edition*

WHEN RICHARD WRIGHT WROTE THE INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION of *Black Metropolis* (see Volume I of the Torchbook edition), he was America's best-known Negro novelist and his most widely read work, *Native Son*, had Chicago as its locale. As Wright phrased it, "I, in common with the authors . . . feel personally identified with the material in this book."

Wright began his essay with a competent and occasionally poetic resumé of the contributions which history and social science had made to an understanding of Western man's "alienation" and the Negro's "degradation." As the essay develops, a passionate cry emerges from the heart of the man who came to Chicago as "Black Boy"—an angry and pessimistic critique of American culture pouring from the lips of a "Native Son." Here is Richard Wright at his provocative and challenging best, deliberately picking the words he knows will hurt and propounding ideas certain to shock his readers, while taking full advantage of the artist's prerogative to overstate his case. He was, undoubtedly, deriving immense satisfaction from wielding the verbal sledge-hammer and twisting the literary stiletto. He was, as all of us were in the last days of World War II, carrying a board-size chip on his shoulder and asking the question, "Have we been fighting once again for everybody else's freedom except our own?" The authors tried to discipline their feelings as they wrote (without total success, as the reader will observe). Richard Wright, as an artist, was under no such role-bound obligation and his essay pulled no punches.

Wright was always driven by a desire to escape from the limitations which systems of race prejudice and discrimination had imposed upon him. First, he made the "Flight to Freedom" from Mississippi to Chicago. Then he sought the more cosmopolitan atmosphere of New York City. During the Depression the Communist Party offered the only milieu in which ordinary Negroes could find some measure of social equality as well as a group of white people who were challeng-

ing the whole system of segregation and discrimination in the Deep South. Richard Wright joined the Party but left in disgust during the Second World War because he felt that it was trying to curb his spontaneity and intellectual freedom, and was asking Negroes to be less militant. *Black Metropolis* was written during the period of Wright's attempt to find a satisfying existence in New York. But the racism he sought to avoid pursued him even into Greenwich Village, where he had purchased a home. So he shook the dust of America from his feet and sailed to Paris, where he lived until his death in 1960. The essay in this book was written after he had broken with the Communist Party and just before he became an expatriate.

Richard Wright was not only fleeing American race prejudice when he exiled himself to Paris. He was also rejecting life in Chicago's "Bronzeville"—the Negro community described in this volume—and in all the other Bronzevilles of America. This rejection is implicit in much of what he has to say in the essay. For him, all of the segregated Negro communities were intellectually sterile ghettos into which Negroes had been driven by social forces beyond their control, and which incorporated, in exaggerated form, what Wright considered some of the worst facets of American life: conspicuous consumption, pursuit of the products of a mass culture, devotion to frivolous trivialities, and a plethora of escapist religion. Richard Wright made no pretense of being detached or even tolerant about the way of life in Bronzeville. He left that to the authors, who were trying to combine the roles of "Negro," which society imposed upon them, and social scientist, which they themselves had chosen.<sup>1</sup>

The "World of the Lower Class," as described in Chapters 21 and 22, was to Wright a morass from which he had extricated himself as a youth, and whose victims he had once summoned to destroy the conditions of their existence by helping to bring about the proletarian revolution. For him, the "Middle-class Way of Life" had a stultifying quality that the artist could not accept. The "Upper-class Way of Life," from which he had been barred originally by lack of a conventional education, he later rejected with scorn when its practitioners tried to make a Race Hero of him after his success as a novelist. In his view,

<sup>1</sup> See E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie*, for an example of the work of a distinguished Negro sociologist who steps out of his professional role in order to make evaluations similar to those of Richard Wright. His earlier works on the Negro family were non-normative.

the cultural milieu of Bronzeville at all levels simply provided an "opiate" for those who should be fighting back.<sup>2</sup>

It is doubtful whether the people of Bronzeville shared Wright's appraisal of their "level of experience" during the mid-Forties as "crude" and "brutal." They certainly would not have seen *themselves* as those who "starve so dreamlessly" or "die like sheep" caught in a "Sargasso of racial subjugation." (They might, however, have made this appraisal of some of their kinsmen in the deep South.) But we suspect that most would have understood *why* Richard Wright reacted as he did, even though they might have felt that he did not present a rounded picture of Negro life; for Negroes, involved in the struggle for dignity and equality, often admire the "extremists" even when they themselves are conservative. They tend to operate upon the principle that "wisdom is justified of all her children."

That urban Negroes in the North have continued to accept a Job Ceiling and a Black Ghetto is due in part to the operation of factors discussed in the chapter on "Advancing the Race," and in part to the fact that the entire institutional structure of Bronzeville is providing basic satisfactions for the "reasonable expectations" shared by people at various class levels. These institutions have been able to provide such satisfactions primarily because a period of post-war prosperity supplied a level of purchasing power permitting individuals and families at each class level to broaden the base of their security and to expand the possibilities for "having fun," "serving God," and "getting ahead." *The norms and values, and the styles of living, described in this book sixteen years ago, have changed but little.* Some change there has been, of course, but it is also true that the more the values and patterns have changed, the more, in a sense, they have remained the same. The authors have attempted to assess the extent and quality of these changes in *Bronzeville 1961* (which follows p. 768 of this volume).

While there has been no drastic change in the class patterns, the proportion of people in the various classes has changed. Unfortunately, the extent of this change can only be measured by a type of detailed

<sup>2</sup> Wright never became an "escapist" despite his move to Paris. The Existentialism and Pan-Africanism which he eventually adopted as a personal philosophy, and which he blended with the Marxism he had embraced in his youth, were simply additional tools for pursuing the task he had made his life work: clarifying and restating "the race problem." See his Introduction to George Padmore's *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* and his little volume on the Bandung Conference, *Color Curtain*, as well as *Listen, White Man*.

research for which the authors have had neither the resources nor the time. For instance, one crucial question relevant to the extent and pace of change would be "Is the proportion of lower-class individuals and families being significantly reduced?"; for the low social status of Negroes as a group is related to the high proportion of people who live lower-class life styles, as described in Chapters 20 and 21. There is some evidence to indicate that the number and proportion of Negroes in Chicago living "respectable" lower-class lives has been increased by the type of migrants who now come from the South. It is probable, too, that there is a growing number of young people with one or two years of high school training who have adopted some of the patterns of middle-class behavior, but who are frustrated in their desire to adopt its whole complex of values because they are not able to secure the type of employment necessary to sustain such a style of life.

Wright's essay, like the authors' concluding chapter, was preoccupied with the probable fate of the Negro American after World War II. We all assumed that post-war race riots were likely to erupt, and that perhaps Negroes were fated to become the victims of a new Depression. Happily, the fears proved groundless. New factors which none of us could have foreseen entered into the picture: full employment stimulated by the demands of a hot war in Korea and a prolonged Cold War; the rise of a vigorous national concern for civil liberties and support for integration stimulated by renewed devotion to the American Creed; competition for the Negro vote, and increased fear of Communist inroads among Negroes.

The challenge to America which, in our pessimism, Richard Wright and the two authors thought would never be taken up *was* accepted by white Americans. But, the "race problem" in Midwest Metropolis has by no means been "solved," and the searching questions raised by Wright are as relevant today as they were in 1945. We would be foolish, for instance, to ignore his query as to whether an increase in the educational level among Negroes without a corresponding expansion of opportunity will "render Negroes more sensitive and therefore violently rebellious against whites, whom they hold responsible for their degradation."

Today, social work agencies in Chicago and elsewhere constantly raise this question as did Wright in the past; and Race Leaders throughout America are continually warning that the activities of non-violent Freedom Riders must not obscure the fact that among Negro teen-

agers patterns of violence are prevalent and that embedded in the character structure of the Negro masses lies a deep vein of suppressed hostility. Dr. James B. Conant has recently emphasized the same point in his perceptive little book, *Slums and Suburbs*.

The family, clique, and associational structures of Negroes in Chicago have been very little affected by the trend toward "integration." Expanded contacts with white people on the job and in public places, as well as in more intimate contexts, have not altered the fact that white Chicago still forces most Negroes to marry Negroes, to have Negroes as their intimate friends, and to participate in all-colored churches and associations. *Changes have been in the direction of a more intensive elaboration of Bronzeville's separate sub-culture, not toward its disappearance.*

Richard Wright would hardly have felt that the changes occurring in Bronzeville since he wrote his essay constitute "Progress." He would not be satisfied with either the complacency of the middle and upper classes, or that hedonism of the lower class which post-War prosperity has reinforced. For Wright felt, like Arnold Toynbee (and ironically enough, like many Negro preachers), that American Negroes have a "mission." He wrote in his essay that ". . . *the American Negro, child of the culture that crushes him, wants to be free in a way that white men are free. . . . Negroes, with but minor exceptions, still believe in the hope of economic rewards; they believe in justice, liberty, the integrity of the individual. In the heart of industrial America is a surviving remnant, perchance a saving remnant, of a passion for freedom, a passion fanned by their national humiliation.*"

Amidst the prosperity of the Sixties, Wright would probably still be asking the embarrassing question: "*Will the Negro, in the language of Andre Malraux, find a meaning in his humiliation and make his slums and his sweat-shops his modern cathedrals out of which will be born a new consciousness that can guide him toward freedom?*"

The social scientist confines himself to much more prosaic questions. He is constrained to ask, for instance, "Is there any way in which Chicago can abolish the Black Ghetto and thus free the areas which surround it from the depredations of its criminals and juvenile delinquents who will probably continue to discharge their aggressions upon the surrounding white world so long as it frustrates their aspirations?" Or, "If the Black Ghetto does eventually disappear (by a process of thinning out and expanded opportunity), will a Bronzeville still

remain, as a separate, but well-ordered Negro community of people who prefer to retain their own sub-culture within the larger urban setting?"

The social scientist is also led to reflect upon questions which have been taboo ever since Booker T. Washington made his Atlanta Compromise speech in the Nineties, but which the Swedish scholar, Gunnar Myrdal did raise obliquely when he wrote: "Social discrimination is powerful as a means of keeping the Negro down. . . . In reality it is not possible to isolate a sphere of life and call it 'social.' There is in fact a 'social' angle to all relations. . . . Social segregation involves a substantial element of discrimination."<sup>3</sup> Some questions which ought to be faced are: "Is it possible for Bronzeilles to disappear so long as *social* segregation exists?" and "Can Negroes, as individuals, ever expect to reap the full fruits of competition in American society so long as they are excluded from those 'social' situations in which so much of the nation's business is transacted and where vital contacts are made and important information communicated?" The question might even be raised as to whether it is not an abridgment of a fundamental right to deny Negroes the opportunities to make the quick jumps toward the top of society that come from "marrying into" money or influence, or to block them from marrying those who have long-term chances for unusual success. (Intermarriage is a *criminal* offense in over half of the states in the Union!)

These are questions which even the most liberal of whites and the majority of Negroes, for strategic reasons, seldom dare ask openly today. But intellectual honesty demands that they be asked, even if the hope still remains that a distinctively American kind of "equality" will evolve which will give Negroes full participation in the economic and political life of the nation without paying the price of full "*social* equality." In the meanwhile, America's Bronzeilles become the structures which "protect" white America from "social contact" with Negroes and which simultaneously provide a milieu for Negro Americans in which they can imbue their lives with meaning.

ST. CLAIR DRAKE

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<sup>3</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, quoted in *Black Metropolis*, p. 125.