

**“A Nettle of Peculiar Sharpness”
The Social Equality Question in African-American Thought**

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Note to reader: The paper to be delivered at the Historical Society conference will be a shortened version of the essay posted here. Feedback is welcome.

Abstract

This essay explores the problem of “social equality” in black thought during the age of segregation. The specter of “social equality” is hardly unknown to students of America’s racial past. From the emergence of abolitionism through the demise of Jim Crow, it served as the code-word for the fear that anything approaching black rights or equality -- be it emancipation, suffrage, equal opportunity, full access to public resources, interracial social movements, or friendship or intimacy across the color line -- would invite, even compel, racial “amalgamation.” Nebulous but explosive, the sexually-charged phantom of “social equality” was continually raised to justify the suppression of equal rights and interracial association -- not to mention many varieties of popular dissent.

Less recognized, however, is the place of the “social equality” question in African-American thought. How did the demon of “social equality” -- and its suggestion of a domino effect from equality to “amalgamation” -- constrain the options, engage the thinking, and shape the ideological landscape of black America? Throughout the Jim Crow era, the quandary of how to handle “social equality” arose regularly in black discourse; indeed, virtually all significant black voices -- political figures, community leaders, novelists, scholars, editors, and the like -- felt compelled at some time or another to address the issue. Such commentary ranged along an ever-shifting spectrum, with flat disclaimers of interest in social equality at one end, defiant endorsements at the other, and innumerable shadings in between. Over time, the impulse to finesse and deflect the “social equality” charge came to be eclipsed by an impulse to redefine social equality, and embrace it as a positive good. This trend, however, was neither linear nor absolute; it was related to, but never reducible to, the growing militancy of black America over the first half of the twentieth century.

In retrieving this neglected discussion, the present essay places in fresh light the fluidities of black political thought during the Jim Crow era.

One of the more arresting scenes in all black literature comes at the outset of Ralph Ellison’s 1952 classic, *The Invisible Man*, where the title character, still a youth, addresses a

gathering of local whites on the theme of “humility.” Drawing on the language of Booker T. Washington, the speech is tailored to Jim Crow specifications. But his listeners, soaked with booze, are determined to put him through his paces. Earnest and ingratiating, the youth’s words are met with a volley of cat-calls. Longer words receive special derision. When the speaker mentions “social responsibility,” he is heckled mercilessly.

“What’s that word you say, boy?”
“Social responsibility.”
“What?”
“Social...”
“Louder.”
“...responsibility.”
“More!”
“Respon--”
“Repeat!”
“--sibility.”

As laughter rocks the room, the youth blurts out an accidental phrase -- one he had often (reports the narrator) “seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private”:

“Social...”
“What?”
“...equality--”

A sudden silence fills the hall. “Say that slowly, son!” demands a man up front. “What, sir?” stammers the youth.

“What you just said!”
“Social responsibility, sir.”
“You weren’t being smart, were you, boy?”
“No, sir!”
“You sure that about ‘equality’ was a mistake?”
“Oh, yes, sir.”

The crisis passes. The apparition of “social equality” has vanished, just as fast as it had appeared. Upon concluding, the speaker is given a round of applause -- and a scholarship to a black college.

The meaning of this incident would not have been lost on Kelly Miller. “‘Social’ and ‘equality’ are two excellent, elegant words,” the eminent black scholar wrote in 1905, “but ‘social equality’ must not be pronounced in good society”; they were, he mused, “like two harmless chemical elements uniting to make a dangerous compound.” It was an apt description. From the rise of abolitionism to the death pangs of Jim Crow, the specter of “social equality” between the races haunted the nation’s climate. Men of letters catalogued its perils; demagogues rehearsed its terrors; one southern state -- Mississippi -- made its promotion an actual crime, punishable by fine and/or imprisonment. Its horrors were broadcast in every reach of public exchange: from political oratory to legislative debate, editorial commentary to popular fiction, religious tracts to judicial opinions, philosophical treatises to social science scholarship. Alarm bells of “social equality” rang in some of the more controversial episodes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century-American history. Public figures whose fealty to white supremacy might be questioned -- from Abraham Lincoln to Terence Powderly, Booker T. Washington to Eugene V. Debs, Eleanor Roosevelt to Pearl Buck -- strove to distance themselves from this “dangerous compound.” “Social equality” was, as one writer put it in the 1920s, “a nettle of peculiar sharpness.”

Just what was “social equality?” *[NB: In this essay the use of “social equality” with quote marks is meant to denote public expressions of alarm about that possibility.]* The expression was famously murky -- and so, all the more ominous. At its most sensational, it was the prospect of sexual relations between black men and white women that “social equality” evoked. But miscegenation was never the sole import of “social equality”; it was, rather, the ultimate scenario, summoned to dramatize what made this “compound” so dangerous. Encoded in the phrase was the assumption that most anything suggesting black rights or equality stood to

dissolve the social barrier between the races -- to invite, even compel, "amalgamation." Black suffrage...emancipation...color-blind schooling or employment...equal access to public space...friendship or intimacy across the color line...interracial movements -- each would take its turn as the focus of "social equality" hysteria. Believers in white supremacy did not all agree as to what social equality was. Some questioned the view, axiomatic to others, that political, civil, or economic rights would inevitably bring it about. But all took it as a given that this thing, social equality, must not be.

The phantom of "social equality" is familiar enough to students of America's racial past. Yet how the issue played out in black political thought has received little attention. The imbalance is striking, if only because black *response* to the charge was so much more fluid, and varied, than the bugbear of "social equality" itself. And no wonder: by modifying "equality," a term of dignity, with "social," a term that both trivialized and demonized black aspirations, the phrase hit its targets with often wrenching dilemmas. How to answer? Was it better to appease Jim Crow sensibilities by disclaiming all interest in social equality, or to refuse, on principle, to renounce *any* form of equality? The dilemma could be an unpleasant one, for -- insofar as "social equality" implied an innate yearning for white companionship, particularly sexual companionship -- there was something demeaning in either disowning the concept *or* embracing it. For blacks active in public life, "social equality" was a treacherous charge -- hard to address, still harder to ignore.

How to handle "social equality" was an issue African Americans would confront throughout the Jim Crow era. Drawn into the fray were women and men from every quarter of public life; indeed, one is hard-put to find any black figure of note who did not feel moved at some time or another to address this thorny topic. Responses to "social equality" were as varied

as the circumstances, purposes, and outlooks of its authors. The present essay seeks to retrieve this once vital, if now little-remembered “problem” in African-American thought.

Drawing upon a multitude of voices, and darting across different phases and settings of Jim Crow America, this survey of black response to “social equality” will surely raise more questions than it answers. The object here is three-fold. First is to convey the sheer *magnitude* of the “social equality question” in black discourse during these years. Second is to show how highly *varied* was black response to this nettlesome charge. Throughout the age of segregation, black commentary on “social equality” ranged along a busy spectrum, with flat disclaimers at one pole, defiant endorsements at the other, and innumerable shadings in between. The third purpose is to explore how this spectrum of commentary *shifted* over the first half of the twentieth century. The evolving response of black America to “social equality” corresponded greatly -- but never neatly -- to the gradual ascent of New Negro militancy.

The thick variety of black reaction defies those dichotomous models -- accommodation vs. militancy, nationalism vs. pluralism, etc. -- that continue to shape historical understanding of black ideology. Close attention to the problem of “social equality,” and to the thrust and parry of black response, can illuminate the textures of black thought in the Jim Crow era. The following is offered as a step in this direction.

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To stress the longevity of “social equality” is not to present the charge as monolithic, or static over time – for it was anything but. The term’s resilience reflected the adaptability of an ongoing fear -- the spectacle of unchecked intimacy between the races -- to ever-changing circumstances, perspectives, and agendas. Only in the modern civil rights era, as the respectability of racism waned, did the phrase finally pass from public currency.

Seldom has a linguistic invention worked to curtail the freedoms of ordinary people with such breadth and power. In the name of social equality's prevention slavery was defended, segregation imposed, the franchise withheld, employment restricted, education denied, the arts censored, camaraderie thwarted, love stifled, deference compelled, social advancement barred, free speech muzzled, and popular movements crushed. At its most frothy and delirious, the alarm could inspire droll commentary on the part of skeptics; as in 1959, when a children's book dreamily relating the wedding of two rabbits -- one black, one white -- was banned from Alabama libraries on the grounds that it suggested social equality. At its most barbaric, it encouraged, and vindicated, acts of outright terror -- from cross burnings, to backwoods killings, to mob rampages through black communities. For Americans of color, anticipating "social equality" became an ingrained reflex. In raising a child to survive in a Jim Crow world, Ralph Ellison wrote in 1945, one of the chief tasks of a black family was to "protect him from those...forces *within himself* which might urge him to reach out for that social and human equality which the white South says he cannot have." Beyond those "charged wires" lay a forbidden "unknown," represented "in its most abstract form by insanity, and most concretely by lynching."

The phrase "social equality" did not on its own, of course, *create* these constraints. Yet neither did it merely reflect them. By offering a name for Ellison's "unknown," the fusion of those two "elegant words" clarified the lines which blacks were not to cross -- and emboldened whites in their resolve to police those lines. At times latent, at times blaring from every headline and soap-box, "social equality" was a critical part of the climate faced by black Americans -- indeed, all Americans disposed to question the racial order -- throughout the long, grim era of segregation.

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From antebellum times to the onset of Jim Crow, those vulnerable to the charge of promoting social equality typically denied any such vision. The denials were far from uniform. In tone, they ran from apologetic to bemused, perplexed to indignant. In substance, they spanned the gamut from cautious accommodationism to militant nationalism. But whatever the thrust of these disclaimers, the general premise was as predictable as the hue and cry over “social equality” itself: such a thing was unrealistic, undesirable, or both. This approach found its most famous expression in Booker T. Washington’s 1895 Atlanta address, in which the Wizard of Tuskegee disowned the quest for social equality as “the extremist folly.”

Well into the new century, black denials of interest in social equality remained commonplace. Many continued to parry the charge in the reassuring tones of Booker T. Washington. Whites need not fear social equality, the message went, if only because blacks neither required nor desired it. “We do not want any social equality,” the moderate black educator William H. Councill insisted in a 1905 Emancipation Day speech in Memphis. “We don’t want any mixing up at all.” AME Bishop B.G. Shaw echoed the theme three decades later at a biracial gathering for better understanding in Birmingham. “The Negro does not want any social equality, he doesn’t even dream of it,” he said -- and vowed to apply the cat-o-nine tails to any who did.

Disdain for those who coveted social equality was sounded frequently by black public figures. Boxing champion Jack Johnson’s open dalliances with white women were denounced at a gathering of black Washingtonians as a brazen play for social equality. Such aspirations were held to be self-defeating. In tones recalling Benjamin Franklin no less than Booker T. Washington, black merchant D.T. Howard of Atlanta shared the secret of his success: “I have

never wasted time, never went in for wild oats, never saw a baseball game...never danced a step,” and finally -- “no social equality for me; no sane-thinking negro wants it.”

But black acquiescence to the cry of “social equality” rang loudest, one might say, through silence. Especially in the Jim Crow South, the term was as forbidding as it was cryptic, and few went out of their way to take it on. Of course, silence could itself be cryptic, perhaps signaling compliance, perhaps impatience. Even Booker T. Washington had his limits when it came to disavowals. When Thomas Dixon, Jr., dangled a gift to the Tuskegee Institute of \$10,000 off the profits of his sensationally racist drama, “The Clansman” -- “providing,” that is, “you give complete and satisfactory proof that you do not desire Social Equality for the Negro” - - Washington would not rise to the bait (“I will make no answer whatever,” he dryly remarked). There was prudence, to be sure, but a certain dignity as well in declining to engage this tireless -- and tiresome -- charge.

To others, disengagement was not the most prudent (or, perhaps, most principled) way to handle “social equality.” Yet when African Americans *did* speak to the matter, it was seldom merely to placate white concerns. Even at the outset of Jim Crow, and even in the deepest South, most disclaimers came with an edge. Precisely what *kind* of edge was another story -- and central to the one offered here. Blacks may have broadly resented being called on to address the demon of “social equality,” but they shared no one strategy for doing so.

Even oaths of indifference or aversion to social equality tended to come as a kind of rhetorical ransom, a tribute black figures deemed it wise to pay before raising some genuine concern. “Before telling you what the Negro really wants,” Virginia college president John M. Gandy told a 1921 interracial conference in Baltimore, “I first want to tell you one thing in particular that he doesn’t want, and that is...social equality.” (He went on to describe his race’s

desire for courteous treatment, adequate schooling, and an end to Jim Crow cars.) The black worker was not asking social equality, John Lacy of Norfolk assured a 1919 convention of the American Federation of Labor -- no oasis of interracial fellowship -- but only the “opportunity to earn bread and butter on an equality with his white union brother.” Assertions of non-interest in social equality were issued as a way to accentuate pursuits blacks considered more relevant, realistic, or both. “Social equality is forbidden,” the *Philadelphia Record* allowed in 1929. “That is not such a great hardship. But economic equality is also banned. That hurts.”

So too did the sheer malevolence of the charge -- “that nightmare known as ‘social equality,’” as black reform activist Fannie Barrier Williams described it before the World’s Congress of Representative Women at the Chicago Exposition of 1893. “At every turn in our lives,” she added, “we meet this fear, and are humiliated by its aggressiveness and meanness.” Particularly humiliating was the constant pressure to preempt “social equality.” Ritual disclaimers may have been prudent, even obligatory, but they were seldom voiced without irritation. “Can [the Negro] do anything that will prove false the idea of social equality?” a columnist for the *California Eagle* asked in 1919.

While some simply denied any interest in social equality and left it at that, others strove more elaborately to deflect the charge. One approach was to dismiss it as gratuitous. Where a Council or a Washington could blandly assure whites that social equality was improbable, others made the point in tones of exasperation. Some scorned it as a meaningless concept, unworthy of attention. A “phantom,” snorted the *Richmond Planet*. “Social equality is non-existent among white, it cannot therefore be existent among colored,” the *Philadelphia Christian Recorder* pronounced. Others tacitly acknowledged that social equality was conceivable, yet maintained -- again, more with annoyance than reassurance -- that blacks did not covet the thing. This was a

white preoccupation, not a black one. “Social equality is in the brain of the alarmist rather than in the mind of the Negro,” as the staunch black civil rights advocate Joseph C. Price put it in his widely-noted 1891 essay, “Does the Negro Seek Social Equality?” Why, some asked, should blacks insist on going where they weren’t wanted? The point was made bluntly by AME Bishop Henry Turner: “Social equality is not contended for either between white and white, black and black, or between white and black. I will not force myself upon others, neither will I allow others to force themselves upon me.”

Black Americans chafed at the condescension implicit in the clamor over “social equality.” “[A]n insult to his growing intelligence,” is how Joseph C. Price regarded the suggestion that the Negro’s quest for civil and political rights was propelled by some primal urge for social equality -- that is, for “the companionship of the whites.” Black Catholic writer Gustave B. Aldrich picked up the theme in 1929: “Somehow most American white people appear to believe that the very highest aim of the educated Colored people is to be socially associated with people who are white,” he marveled. “This is what makes black folks laugh.” When Fritz Cansler of the Denver YMCA drew up pointers for whites on how to address black audiences, airy references to “social equality” ranked high on his list of “don’ts” (along with terms like “nigger,” “coon,” and “negress,” “darky stories,” and gauzy tributes to “my old black mammy”). Particularly irksome, for those of higher standing, was the indifference of the charge to distinctions of class. Black journalist and editor John Carter Minkins noted with incredulity that, by the logic of the “social equality”-alarmists, “[a] Negro Bishop, or Nun is held inferior, socially, to a white murderer, convict, bagnio or brothel proprietor or proprietress.” The insatiable demand for disavowals of social equality -- whatever the term meant -- was galling.

What rankled most, though, was the use of “social equality” to thwart those rights blacks *did* seek. Fannie Barrier Williams gave eloquent voice to this sentiment, observing how black people, when asserting their rights as citizens, “were at once suspected of [aspiring to] social equality....If we seek the sanctities of religion, the enlightenment of the university, the honors of politics, and the natural recreations of our common country, the social equality alarm is instantly given, and our aspirations are insulted.” Bishop Turner expressed the point still more vividly. “Riding in the same cars, stopping at the same inns, sitting in the same theaters,” he exclaimed in 1893, “no more involve a social question than speaking the same language, reading the same books, hearing the same music, traveling on the same highway, eating the same food, breathing the same air, warming by the same sun, shivering in the same cold, defending the same flag, loving the same country, or living in the same world.” And yet, “thousands of people are in deadly fear about social equality!” Turner dismissed the term as a “subterfuge,” crafted to deny blacks equal rights. Endless variations on this theme cropped up over the age of Jim Crow. All told, the contribution of “social equality” to the injustices brought upon black America was encapsulated by the *St. Louis Argus* in 1921, when it described this “bugaboo” as “a time-worn saying, with many aliases, that has been used in the South to cheat, rob, murder, lynch, burn, disfranchise, Jim-Crow, segregate and ostracize the Negro for the past half century.”

If black commentators enumerated the many *effects* of “social equality,” so they found varied ways of explaining its underlying *motivations*. To some, it was a hysterical fixation. Kelly Miller characterized the crusade to keep blacks off the “sacred preserves of social equality” as a “magnificent obsession,” under whose spell the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, the Sermon on the Mount, the Declaration of Independence, and the American Constitution “all break down or balk at the color line.” “Social equality”-alarmists, that is, were in the grip of

a frenzy beyond reach of sober thought. To others, “social equality” was all too rational and deliberate. Hence, the confession of an imaginary segregationist, conjured by NAACP Field Secretary William Pickens: “Everybody who knows us Southerners well [knows] that ‘social equality’ is just a smoke screen behind which we seek to hide our attack on all sorts of equality and opportunity for the Negro race....But we find it inconvenient to make a direct assault against the Negro’s right to vote, to hold office, to work, to own property anywhere, to be respected as a man, and to live free, and so we make the attack behind this age-old smoke screen, and we generally get away with it.” Between these differing representations of “social equality” -- the one, as fevered and unreasoning; the other, as cool and calculated -- neither had a monopoly on the truth. In the broad expanse of Jim Crow discourse, plenty of space existed for both earnest *and* demagogic deployments of “social equality.” The point here is that each animating force -- delirium and cynicism -- became the target of incisive critiques from opponents of white supremacy.

And so, alongside *conciliatory* disclaimers of “social equality” (*à la* Washington) there persisted another, a more *militant* brand of disclaimer. Unlike reassuring disclaimers, militant ones typically implied some bargain, often an elaborate dance, between disavowals and demands. And militant disclaimers went beyond merely insisting on some genuine rights in exchange for the renunciation of “social equality”; no less vigorously, they subjected the alarum of “social equality” itself to meticulous dissection. How they did so warrants close attention, for it reveals much about the potency, and limits, of the challenge to white supremacy.

In countless ways, blacks underscored the murkiness of “social equality.” To the *Wilmington (Del.) Advocate* it was “a vague, unreal, evanescent thing.” “Mildewed pap,” grumbled the *Chicago Defender*. James Weldon Johnson wearily described “social equality” as

at once “a most concrete and a most elusive obstacle in the Negro’s way. It is never defined; it is shifted to block any path that may be open; it is stretched over whole areas of contacts and activities; it is used to cover and justify every form of restriction, injustice, and brutality practiced against the Negro.” Highlighting the nebulousness of “social equality” was one of the most familiar forms of response; here was a sure-fire way to puncture its credibility, to pierce its aura of inexpressible evil. Thus, the imprecision of “social equality” could cut both ways -- if it made the charge all the more frightful, it also enabled its targets to choose the terrain on which to respond.

One medium for militant disclaimers was sarcasm. Take a sampling of headlines in the black press: “Social Equality in Georgia” (referring to the KKK’s practice of whipping blacks and whites alike); “Social Equality Got ‘Em 40 Years in Prison” (referring to two partners in crime, one white and one black); “Southern Official Arrested Practicing Social Equality with Senegambian Paramour.” Columnists could be just as biting. “Horrors! Social equality!” quipped the irascible George Schuyler, upon noting the inflammatory presence of a black businessmen at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon in Philadelphia. “Social equality!” exclaimed J.A. Rogers, relating how southern post offices had a way of losing mail addressed to blacks with the offending prefixes, “Mr.” or “Mrs.” Sarcastic asides on the issue abounded in black newspaper editorials as well. Thus, as shudders of “social equality” greeted word that the wife of black congressman Oscar DePriest had attended a White House tea hosted by Mrs. Herbert Hoover, the *Houston Informer* observed that Christ himself had “had ‘tea’ with a member of a despised group,” and so was condemned “for acts of ‘social equality.’” In his sardonic manner, the author Richard Wright derided “social equality” simply by placing it among a galaxy of topics he found whites loathe to discuss with blacks; among the others, “American white

women...French women, Jack Johnson, the entire northern part of the United States, the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln...the Pope, Jews, the Republican Party, slavery...Communism, Socialism, the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution, or any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self-assertion on the part of the Negro.” (The most *accepted* topics for interracial discussion, Wright added sunnily, were “sex and religion.”) For those inclined to ridicule the “social equality” phobia, sarcasm furnished a wealth of ammunition -- and, no doubt, gratification as well.

If critiques of “social equality” drew heavily on sarcasm, the sarcasm in turn drew its edge from the vagueness, hypocrisy, and illogic of its subject. Recitations of the sheer silliness of “social equality” filled the black press. With evident mirth, the *Defender* in 1930 described a “quandary” confronting white New Orleans after “some misguided person threw a bomb at a street car, and, not knowing the Jim Crow rules of that city very well, tossed it into the front of the car where the white people were riding.” What to do? A proposal to paint the cars half black and half white (as guidance for future bombers) went nowhere, but no more successful was a scheme simply to allow passengers of each race to sit anywhere on the bus. This would “smack of social equality” -- too high a price to pay for its admittedly dubious benefits. Sarcastic critiques of “social equality” were, of course, inseparable from sarcastic critiques of Jim Crow itself.

Indeed, black critics took relish in turning the logic of “social equality” against itself -- or against its close companion, segregation. Barriers to black advancement, it was noted, could encourage unintended forms of interracial contact. Lester A. Walton of the *New York Age* chuckled in 1913 that “[d]espite the rantings of Vardaman, Tillman, and Hoke Smith about ‘social equality,’ they insist on the appointment of a white man as United States Minister to

Haiti,” where diplomatic protocol would compel him to “fraternize with black people.” The *Houston Informer* savored the demand that a hospital for black veterans at Tuskegee be staffed by whites only. “Where,” it impishly asked, “is the likelihood of more so-called ‘social equality’ -- with colored nurses waiting on and serving colored male [patients] or with white nurses serving and administering unto the wants of these black warriors?” Musings like these were no idle diversion: in exposing the numberless absurdities of “social equality,” critics were taking on the very foundations of white supremacy -- the edifice this alarm was sounded so stridently to defend.

If the logic of “social equality” came under sustained attack, so did the rationality of those who spouted the charge (and, by implication, of those who championed Jim Crow). So dogmatic was the typical crusader against social equality, sociologist W.O. Brown noted, that he did not bother to defend his position when challenged; rather, he is simply “horrified at the challenge. His reaction is violent and emotional, condemnatory and harsh.” “The fear of social equality,” the editors of *Opportunity* added, “is at once terrifying in its intensity and inexplicable by the ordinary processes of reasoning.”

To the rational mind, “social equality” fairly cried out for ridicule -- particularly in its more “polite” implications. Insofar as it meant fellowship imposed upon hapless whites by blacks eager for their company, critics found a logic that was easy to debunk. Blacks did not hanker for white companionship. It should go without saying that friendship grew out of mutual interest. If individual blacks and whites chose freely to associate, where was the harm? On the other hand, should one party feel no desire for social contact with the other, the latter could hardly bring it about by force. “No man into whose house or into whose dance halls I could

force my way could be my social equal,” as William Pickens deftly put it. Defined as unsought camaraderie, the notion of social equality could be laughed off as ludicrous on its face.

But “social equality” was a versatile adversary, endowed with multiple meanings, not all of them so readily dispatched. Beneath the suggestion of involuntary companionship lurked another that was, in Jim Crow America, far less innocuous. This, of course, was sex across the color line; particularly, across the line between black men and white women. It was above all the whiff of “amalgamation” that made the charge so hair-raising, so unnerving -- and thus, so instrumental to the defense of segregation. Some “social equality”-alarmists merely hinted at the specter; others raised it expressly. Here was a dimension that blacks found trickier to address. How they answered the term’s sexual insinuation merits close review, for therein lies much of the drama of black America’s encounter with “social equality.”

Unlike enforced sociability, the prospect of interracial sex could hardly be dismissed as irrational, let alone inconceivable. On this plane, critics of “social equality” tread more carefully. Blacks derided the idea that any step toward racial equality would trigger an orgy of miscegenation. In any case, sex across the color line was less a *threat to* than a *timeless legacy of* white supremacy. The countless shades of “blackness” in America owed far more to the interracial lusts of white men than of black. “[W]ere it not too bitter a thought to utter here,” wrote Anna Julia Cooper in *A Voice From the South*, “I might add that the overtures for forced association in the past history of these two races were not made by the manacled black man, nor by *the silent and suffering black woman!*” Bitter as the thought was, Cooper did utter it, as would innumerable others for decades to come. Here was one of the surest ways to discredit the “social equality” charge, to expose its shabby, hypocritical core. Reverend William Flagg of Memphis blasted those whites who railed against social equality -- and who yet would “go home

at night to their common law Negro wives and kiss good-bye in the morning their own illegitimate and mongrel mulatto child. We have social equality....forced upon us [as] a way to gratify the hellish lust of the low and vicious white man.” Inherent in the furor over “social equality,” double standards like these drew penetrating critiques. A 1921 cartoon entitled “What is Social Equality?” poignantly evoked two alternative meanings: “Is it Social Equality if a black woman bears a white man’s child? Or is it Social Equality if that mother wants to ride in the same railroad coach with the father of her child?”

Nor did critics let pass another telling side to the “social equality” obsession. Intermarriage (or more casual expressions of love across the color line) was, after all, a two-way street. Could white men not curb their own carnal impulses -- or, for that matter, those of their womenfolk? Bishop Turner made the point with sly indirectness. “Social equality”-alarmists “imagine that riding with colored people is dangerous; that the chance acquaintance will lead to marriage. They wish to be protected from such consequences by law. They dare not trust themselves.” Noting a certain penchant among white women for mates of color, Schuyler pronounced them “staunch advocates of social equality.”

That whites had always been the chief instigators of “amalgamation”; that the sexual ventures of white men with black women were customarily furtive and exploitative; that the prospects of sex if not marriage between black men and white women implied some agency on the part of the latter -- all were incontestable points. But they skirted a delicate matter: was miscegenation desirable, or even acceptable? On this question, black response to “social equality” lost much of its cohesion. Some simply held that, as black Americans did not want interracial sex, the question was moot. Others granted that interracial romance was not generally desirable, but stressed that this was a thing for individuals, not law or custom, to decide. Some

remained agnostic: it may or may not be acceptable, but only nature could resolve that cosmic question. In their 1945 classic *Black Metropolis*, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton tossed all these themes (and more) into the “likely answer” of a hypothetical northern black civic leader to the “social equality question”: “If you mean a *yearning* to visit white people in the homes and to be visited by them -- nonsense! But, as for the privilege of doing even that if both white and Negro individuals desire it -- why not?...Intermarriage? Well, it takes two to get married, and if one of the them is white, what right has the law to interfere? But why should Negroes seek to marry whites? They have all the colors within their own race [punctuated with a nervous laugh]. What Negroes *really* want is equal economic opportunity and enough room to live in. If you give us that, and just leave people alone, these social problems will work themselves out. Why raise the question of social equality, anyhow? Nobody’s pressing that issue. You can’t legislate social equality, and it’s certainly not democratic to legislate against it.” Edgy, restless, scattershot, this synthetic response conveyed the discomfort brought by the most sensational thrust of “social equality” -- a suggestion most African Americans were loathe to either accept or deny. On this overtly sexual level, “social equality” dared critics to take their challenge onto especially dangerous terrain -- a place where black discourse was ever at its most wary and ambivalent.

Little wonder that black commentators often found themselves looking for ways to redefine “social equality” along lines that seemed less inflammatory, felt more authentic -- usually a mix of the two. Some opted simply to modify the term, or to propose some similar-sounding, if less charged, alternative. In lieu of social equality -- “for that can never be” -- blacks aspired to “social morality,” missionary worker Sara Duncan pleaded. To the young W.E.B. Du Bois, “social equilibrium” sat better; to the *Houston Informer*, “social equity.”

Another stratagem to defang “social equality” was to alter the received meaning of the phrase, in ways that might drain it of racial content altogether. The *Chicago Defender* expanded the range of variables that social equality might equate to include almost everything -- if only to expose the whole idea as hopelessly overblown. “[T]here is no such thing as social equality even among those of the same race and blood,” it argued; “[it is] impossible for wealth and poverty, intelligence and ignorance, vice and virtue, to meet upon terms of social equality.”

We have seen how black rejoinders to “social equality” took on a variety of themes during the Jim Crow era. Commentators outlined its unreality, stressed its irrelevance to black concerns, hammered away at its intrinsic dishonesty, nebulosity, and logical inconsistency. Here was a target almost laughably easy to harpoon, and black critics hit their mark often. Yet doing so only took them so far. Purveyors of “social equality” did, after all, have a point. However impeachable its reasoning -- not to mention its aims -- “social equality” drew a certain credence from its holistic understanding of race relations: from its insight that no viable scheme of racial domination could vary too much from one venue to the next; that the maintenance of white supremacy on any level demanded its preservation on all levels; that racial equality was contagious, and not readily contained within set compartments. Expressed by some, simply intuited by others, the domino theory underlying “social equality” -- the expectation that one kind of equality would hasten the arrival of others -- was not so laughable. It was a point that the critiques examined above -- from perfunctory disclaimers to elaborate dissections of “social equality” -- did not confront. For black commentators, demolishing the moral and intellectual integrity of the charge surely had its rewards, both psychic and strategic. In the end, however, it did not wholly free them from the rhetorical trap “social equality” posed, and alongside the glee

with which they skewered the concept was a sour taste -- an audible disgust over having to distance themselves from any kind of equality in the first place.

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Some, in fact, refused to do it. Even as Booker T. Washington issued black America's most celebrated disavowal of social equality in 1895, "a slight undertow of dissent," as later described by Washington associate Emmett J. Scott and author Lyman Beecher Stowe, could already be detected. "If we are not striving for equality," Atlanta University President John Hope asked the following year "in heaven's name for what are we living?" His next words crackled with defiance: "Now, catch your breath, for I am going to use an adjective: I am going to say we demand *social* equality...Rise brothers, come let us possess this land."

And so, even in the early days of Jim Crow -- the "nadir of the Negro's status in American society," as Rayford W. Logan famously put it -- not everyone was ready to settle for disclaiming or shooting holes in "social equality." There were those who resolved stoutly to endorse this thing termed social equality. In fact, there had always been those who did. But in the early decades of the new century this impulse gradually expanded. Leading the charge -- and ruffling not a few feathers, black and white, along the way -- was W.E.B. Du Bois. From his perch as editor of the NAACP journal the *Crisis* (where "[t]aboos fell like tenpins," in the words of biographer David Levering Lewis), Du Bois issued trenchant critiques of the "social equality" hysteria -- and of the tendency of black leaders to run from the term. The opening salvo came in 1911 with an editorial, entitled "Social Equality," rebuking a black physician in Denver for assuring a white audience that his race did not seek that notorious prize. Of course we do, Du Bois replied, and those too fearful to say as much should step back and keep "a dignified silence." Equalities of all sorts were inseparable and interdependent, he argued; without full

social equality, blacks could not enjoy political equality. Here was the first of many assaults in the pages of the *Crisis* on the pejorative atmosphere of “social equality.” The campaign stirred much unease among black contemporaries. The *New York Age*, for instance, took exception to Du Bois’s 1911 pronouncement. After invoking the familiar theme that social equality -- here defined as forced association -- simply could not be, the *Age* insisted that, at any rate, civil rights and social equality were not the same, nor did attainment of the former depend upon the latter. At the outset of the 1910s, relatively few within the black political mainstream were prepared to come out unreservedly on the Du Bois side of the question. But over time, social equality-endorsements like those offered in the *Crisis* helped expand the boundaries of respectable thinking on the race question. And with the tumultuous events of the late 1910s -- the Great Migration, the Great War, and Red Summer of 1919 -- this inclination to move beyond disclaimers of “social equality” gained momentum.

However provocative Du Bois’s position on the question may have been, there were others ready to confront “social equality” even more boldly. Consider the stance taken in 1921 by Chandler Owen, co-editor (with A. Philip Randolph) of the black socialist journal, the *Messenger*. Like Du Bois, Owen refashioned social equality as a worthy and vital goal, entailing the right to vote, an end to segregation in public services, and the freedom to choose one’s friends without external constraint. But Owen went still further -- extending his conception of social equality square onto the forbidden ground of sexuality. “[L]et us be clear and unequivocal,” he wrote, with undisguised (indeed, italicized) relish: “*We believe in the unconditional intermarriage of races between any sane grown persons who desire to marry.*”

It was in the pages of the *Messenger*, black journalist Eugene Gordon would later recall, that the New Negro first appeared, “dar[ing] to state baldly on the printed page what had hitherto

been only whispered in secret and dark places...”; first and foremost, “a desire for complete social equality.” In truth, neither the genesis of the New Negro nor the spread of calls for “complete social equality” could be traced so definitively. In the gradual emergence from those days of “secret whisperings” and “dark places,” the *Messenger* was merely a leading agent of a wider trend developing in the epoch of World War I. But on two scores, Gordon’s statement hit the mark. First, closely linked to the advent of the New Negro was an itch to disclaim the disclaimers of “social equality.” And second, however much the concurrent awakenings of the New Negro and of social equality advocacy were spurred by the transformations of the World War I-era, neither became prevalent overnight. While not unprecedented, the unabashed calls by Du Bois and Owen for social equality remained extraordinary in 1921 -- therein lay their drama.

Over the 1920s such pronouncements would become more commonplace, and less heretical. Whether and how to cross the rhetorical mine-field of “social equality” emerged as one of the livelier questions in black public life. “What is Meant by the Term ‘Social Equality?’ Do Negroes Desire it?” asked a section heading in the *Negro Year Book* for 1922-24. “What Is Social Equality?” read the title of a 1926 essay by E. Franklin Frazier, included in a special issue of the *World Tomorrow* devoted to the theme, “Social Equality: The Crux of Negro-White Relations.” “What do Negroes think about Social Equality?” began an advertisement that year for the *Crisis*. (“[D]o not guess at it,” it enigmatically advised.) No consensus among African Americans came together on how best to engage the “social equality bugaboo,” nor would one materialize over the second quarter of the twentieth century. Rather, an active reassessment was underway over which, between disclaimers and endorsements, was the truer path. And inseparable from that discussion was the matter of what social equality actually meant. “As Afro-Americans discovered in the years following World War I,” Paula Giddings rightly notes,

“the goal of social equality evokes more questions than it answers” -- starting with, “What should equality mean?” A 1931 interracial conference in Lakeland, Florida “did not produce a definition of social equality,” the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported, “although the delegates struggled for two hours with that elusive point.” The varied lines of black response would not change substantially from the dawn of Jim Crow to the rise of the modern Civil Rights movement. What *would* change was where the preponderance of response fell along the gradations between cautious disclaimers and bold affirmations of social equality.

This shift was previewed in a 1920 tale by Du Bois, describing an imaginary encounter between a black man, one “Brownson,” and a white man, “Mr. Paleface,” in the parlor of the latter. At the outset, Paleface greets his visitor expansively. I know your people well, he states, and I deplore their ill-treatment; my father was an abolitionist; I had a black mammy; I send annual checks to the Hampton Institute.... Brownson takes all this in with polite reserve, then turns to the matter at hand. “I have come to ask for certain rights and privileges. My people...want to ask---” At this, Paleface raises a “deprecating finger.” “Not social equality,” he cautions; “I trust you are not asking that.” “Certainly not,” Brownson demurs: “I think the right of a man to select his friends and guests and decide with whom he will commit matrimony is sacredly his and his alone.” “Good---good!” a relieved Paleface says. “Now, my man, we can talk openly.” Yet at each request posed by Brownson -- the rights to vote, to participate in government, to sit together with whites in public settings, to help conduct movements for social uplift -- his would-be benefactor balks. Every one of these aims, an increasingly agitated Paleface exclaims, would some way or another bring white women into social contact with the darker race. By the end, Brownson has had enough; clearly, disclaimers of “social equality” have disclaimed too much. “I see,” he replies, “that social equality, far from being what I don’t

want, is precisely what I do want.” With that, all semblance of civility is gone. “I knew it!” Paleface screams. “I knew it all the time: I saw it sneaking into your eyes. You want -- you dare to want to marry my sister.” “Not if she looks like you,” Brownson evenly retorts, “and not if she’s as big a liar.” The visit is over. The Twenties are just getting going.

With the New Negro came a widening of the impulse to affirm social equality as a positive good. The *Messenger* conveyed the shift in 1927 by contrasting “the Old Negro,” who “protests that he does not want social equality,” with “the New Negro,” who, “seeing that this is but another phrase for social justice, demands it.” By 1930 George Schuyler was puckishly promoting the establishment of a “Social Equality League,” with branches ideally “in every community, North and South, recruited from the best Negroes and white people.” By and large, this gathering chorus of social equality advocates built on the themes of Du Bois and Owen cited earlier. “Unqualified political, economic, and social equality” -- here, the young Ralph Bunche wrote in the early 1930s, was the Negro’s “ultimate *desideratum*.” Such a condition was essential to the achievements, and dignity, of black Americans. “Complete social equality in every conceivable sense of the word,” as Schuyler put it; the resonance of pronouncements so forthright, so unapologetic, so unreserved, is palpable. Endorsements of social equality presaged Martin Luther King’s later talk of “redeeming the soul of America.” “Unless the Negro is granted social equality,” the *Pittsburgh Courier* insisted, “then both Christianity and democracy are doomed.”

In the yeasty days of the New Negro, the New Deal, and World War II, affirmations of social equality became more and more the norm, with disclaimers now striking many as a residue of bygone accommodationism. Booker T. Washington’s own handling of “social equality” came in for growing scorn. His 1895 assurance that the “wisest of my race” wanted no part of this

“extreme folly,” black educator Horace Mann Bond wrote in 1937, showed his “mastery of the art of opposing shibboleth with shibboleth.” By World War II, even Washington protégé Emmett J. Scott was on record supporting the idea. Particularly revealing was the 1944 volume, *What the Negro Wants*, a landmark survey of black voices spanning a diverse ideological spectrum. Fully half the contributors -- Rayford Logan, W.E.B. Du Bois, Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, Doxey A. Wilkerson, Langston Hughes, and Sterling A. Brown -- still saw reason to address the “social equality question.” But it was the collective thrust of their commentaries that stood out: some ridiculed warnings of “social equality” as stale and demagogic; others flatly endorsed social equality as an indispensable condition; none fudged, or denied its desirability.

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Still, this turn towards affirming social equality should not be drawn too definitively, for it was neither immediate, nor linear, nor absolute. The familiar shades of black response to “social equality” -- from ignoring the notion, to denying, parrying, ridiculing, redefining and endorsing it -- all remained very much alive through the 1920s, ‘30s, and ‘40s. Many continued to approach the topic gingerly, by degrees. For some it came down to the question of priorities. In his epic 1944 study of the Negro Problem, *The American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal found a striking disjuncture in the significance blacks and whites (of the South) attached to the prospect of social equality. Along the range of racial proscriptions -- extending from bars on social equality (i.e. interracial companionship, especially sexual), through segregation and disfranchisement codes, to discrimination in the realms of legal justice and economic opportunity -- whites assigned the greatest importance to the social equality end of the spectrum, and the least to the other end; blacks, for their part, attached the greatest importance (and directed their heartiest resistance) to the more material forms of discrimination at the latter end of the

spectrum, while evincing the least interest in the outcome whites viewed with greatest alarm -- social equality.

Inseparable from the matter of where social equality fell in the scheme of black priorities was the undying question of what the thing actually *was*, and many continued to subject its meaning to careful review -- to sever prevailing white from prevailing black conceptions of social equality -- before taking their stand. "It is important that we discuss this problem of social equality," the dynamic young Harlem reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., wrote in 1945. "What is social equality? In the mind of the black man it means equality in health, housing, and recreational and cultural facilities. In the mind of the white man...it means intermarriage and sexual intercourse." Having clarified this "profound distinction," Powell came to his conclusive (and quite memorable) resolution: "THE NEGRO WANTS SOCIAL EQUALITY BUT NOT SOCIAL-INTERCOURSE EQUALITY."

And, there remained others who still disclaimed outright any yearning for social equality, whatever its meaning. "[W]hy bring up that old 'boog-aboo'?" black reader Frank J. Hutchings wrote in the *Macon Telegraph* in 1937. "The Southern Negro doesn't want social equality any more than the Southern white man." In more than age alone, the "Old Negroes" lived on, and where one stood on the "social equality question" remained a measure of their longevity. In his 1933 work, *The Mis-education of the Negro*, black historian Carter G. Woodson lamented the "loss of vision" and "moral surrender" prevalent among contemporary "spokesmen of the race." In contrast to their Revolutionary-era forbears, "[Negroes today] are saying that they do not want social equality." Schuyler glumly seconded Woodson's assessment. "Every honest student of the race problem...recognizes that social equality is the only real solvent of racial differences, but there are not ten nationally prominent Negroes who will say as much without qualification."

What was new by the interwar years was a growing impatience with such disclaimers. Particularly unforgiving was Schuyler. “[W]e still have a horde of so-called Negroes,” he muttered, “who continue yelling, along with the crackers, for ‘No social equality’.” No less caustic was the columnist J.A. Rogers: “[T]hose Negroes who protest they don’t want social equality evidently want social inequality. Which is alright for them, but why speak for us who not only want social equality, but all the trimmings that go with it.” Communist activist Angelo Herndon watched with disgust as black editor Oscar Adams assured a largely white crowd in Depression-era Birmingham that “we Negroes don’t want social equality.” “I was furious,” Herndon recalled decades later. “I said inside of myself: Oscar Adams, we Negroes want social and every other kind of equality.” Umbrage at such Washingtonian caution was not confined to radicals. In 1930, a clamor swept the black community of Gary, Indiana for the ouster of a black high school principal who had told a gathering of white Rotarians that his people no longer craved social equality. When Samuel J. Battle, black New York police veteran, informed a church audience in 1936 that, “we do not want social equality,” the *Baltimore Afro-American* icily advised that “no one take Lieutenant Battle seriously except when he discusses police matters...for, on social questions he...really doesn’t mean what he says.”

Such verdicts notwithstanding, a persisting reluctance to demand social equality could not all be laid to the timidity of Schuyler’s “so-called Negroes.” In fact, many raising the banner of the New Negro shared in this reluctance. “The New Negro,” the editor of the *Oklahoma City Black Dispatch* told a white audience, wants “social justice....none of my race is dreaming of ‘social equality.’” Likewise, Grant D. Venerable, president of the black Los Angeles-based Agenda Club, disputed those “misguided minds” who suggested that the New Negro wanted social equality. “To make such an assertion,” he said, “is an exhibition of ignorance beyond

comparison. We want social equality and social intercourse with the other races in no greater measure than they desire it with us...Equal opportunity is our plea.” It would appear that, if refusing to disclaim social equality was one way to establish one’s militancy, not everyone in the New Negro orbit adopted this route.

Indeed, if many among the new guard regarded disclaimers as gratuitous and undignified, some questioned *endorsements* of social equality on the same grounds. *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist Floyd J. Calvin deplored its inclusion in a 1932 series of demands drafted by Du Bois. “The things demanded,” he explained, already “*implied* social equality.” Adding the notion explicitly just made the series “ambiguous.” But ambiguity was only half the issue. To Calvin, the call for social equality had lost whatever punch it ever had; what had once been stirringly defiant now seemed hackneyed, if not downright embarrassing. “[P]ersonally, I think the social equality phrase is a relic from days past when most Negroes were afraid of the term, and it was used to show courage. Using the term as such no longer shows courage. In fact, it sounds a little ridiculous to me.” Schuyler himself, for all his manifest impatience with disavowers of social equality, betrayed ambivalence over its champions as well in his 1931 parody of the black protest establishment, *Black No More*. Especially stinging was his caricature of Du Bois: in Schuyler’s rendering, the venerated editor of the *Crisis* and NAACP official becomes the vainglorious Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard, editor of the *Dilemma*, and president of an elegantly situated National Social Equality League. The term, one suspects, had begun to sound a little ridiculous to Schuyler, too.

And for many, decimating the logic of “social equality” remained more appealing than redefining and embracing the term. A 1946 letter to the *Atlanta Constitution* suggested the persistence of that militant strain of “social equality”-disclaimers. The writer rehearsed the

classic themes of that tradition: that “social equality” was a ruse to obfuscate the true aims of black Americans; that whites had long pursued sex across the color line more ardently than blacks; that black men did not crave white female companionship; and, that blacks did, unreservedly, claim “the basic rights and opportunities of American citizens.” The author’s identity suggests how relevant, and complicated, the “social equality question” remained in the racial fabric of postwar America. Lest it be imagined that disclaimers of “social equality” came only from “Old Negroes” -- the writer was just seventeen years old. Lest it be imagined that the deepest nerve tapped by “social equality,” the taboo against racial intermarriage, no longer constricted the choices of young blacks -- the writer would later break off relations with a white woman he would likely, but for race, have married. Lest it be imagined that, by 1946, only those anchored in the accommodationist heritage of Booker T. Washington would prefer to ridicule “social equality” than to embrace social equality -- the writer was Morehouse College sophomore Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Having surveyed these shifting currents of black response to “social equality” during the 1920s, ‘30s, and ‘40s, we are left with the question of explanation; a two-part question, really. What prompted so many to start affirming rather than disclaiming (or avoiding) this charged notion? And what kept so many others -- New Negro as well as Old -- from joining in this trend?

It is, of course, no accident that the spread of black endorsements of social equality tracked closely with the spread of New Negro militancy -- with a restlessness, that is, to start demanding full rights without delay. As Eugene Gordon had suggested, this growing impatience

with “social equality” disclaimers was integral to a more general rise of black assertiveness, as the age of Booker T. Washington gave way to that of, say, A. Philip Randolph.

Both reflecting and stoking this boldness was a strain of opposition to “social equality”-baiting arising within *white* America. While most white critics of Jim Crow continued to steer clear of “social equality,” voices of white racial liberalism could be heard sounding the same affirmative notes as that of Du Bois and company. In the wake of the 1908 anti-black riot in Springfield, Illinois, William English Walling caused a stir -- and helped set in motion the founding of the NAACP -- with a call on whites to “treat the negro on a plane of absolute political and social equality,” and thus revive the “spirit of the abolitionists.”

Accelerating the challenge to “social equality” was the renewal of American radicalism. Based in the interracialist wing of organized labor, Depression-era socialists, communists, and non-aligned radicals distinguished themselves by their calls for social equality. In a variety of campaigns -- from the tenant farmers to the Scottsboro Boys to the fledgling Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) -- labor radicals, black and white, called on workers to forge bonds of social equality across the color line. The equation of social equality and radicalism (each increasingly synonymous in the public mind with communism) confirmed the notion that the two were mutually reinforcing, if not interchangeable. Alarming though it may have been for many -- and not only to the hardest of race-baiters and red-baiters -- the militancy of black and white radicals on the “social equality question” had an emboldening effect on the overall tenor of black response. Pioneering civil rights attorney` Charles Hamilton Houston conceded the point in a 1934 address. No communist himself, Houston allowed that the communists had, through their fiery assaults on the racial order, “made it impossible for any aspirant to Negro leadership to advocate less than full economic, political and social equality, and expect to retain the respect

and confidence of the group.” This influence from the left was a vital force in contemporary black thought. In the end, though, it was but one of a spiral of trends -- including the New Negro, New Deal liberalism, intellectual pluralism, egalitarian radicalism, interracial unionism, and the anti-discriminatory reforms of the World War II era -- that was quickening the embrace of social equality.

Why, then, the broad reluctance among African Americans to join in full-throated claims to social equality, even among many who otherwise insisted on equal rights? In part, it was the concept’s singular element of menace, if not outright danger. Throughout its lengthy run, “social equality” stood as a kind of “third rail” of racial politics. Nor did its voltage diminish as Jim Crow passed its peak of legitimacy; growing affirmations of social equality should not lead us to suppose that “social equality,” the accusation, had lost its charge. In some ways, its virulence actually intensified during the second quarter of the twentieth century, as defenders of white supremacy decried the coming of New Deal reform, the rebirth of industrial unionism, and the resurgence of both civil rights and radical movements. For those who bristled (or shuddered) at these interrelated campaigns, “social equality” resounded as never before.

It was in the South especially that “social equality” waged its protracted last stand. A few instances give a feel for the effort. In 1938, Martin Dies’s House Committee on Un-American Activities probed the alleged perversion of the Federal Theater Project into an agent of social equality between the races. During the war, the Fair Employment Practice Committee was demonized as the incubus of social equality, while word swept the South that clandestine “Eleanor Clubs” were prompting black domestics to withhold their labor until granted that trophy. For its part, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare -- an outfit that staked out the fragile common ground of southern, New Deal, and CIO liberalism -- was described in the gentle

words of Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo as an “Un-American, negro social equality, communist, mongrel outfit.” It was toward popular movements that crossed the color line -- and thereby challenged entrenched hierarchies of race *and* class -- that some of the shrillest cries of “social equality” were directed. In *The Mind of the South*, W.J. Cash portrayed this mentality with a crisp equation: “labor unions + strikers = Communists + atheism + social equality with the Negro.” The imperative of crushing (or averting) such movements breathed fresh life into the “social equality” scare, with often brutal results. Thus, if radical tributes to social equality nudged a portion of the black mainstream towards espousing the ideal, they also provoked a fearsome counterattack within white America. Especially below the Mason-Dixon Line, black Americans still had ample cause to approach “social equality” with discretion, if not trepidation. For many, embracing the slogan remained simply one step further than they dared to go.

But prudence only begins to explain the uneasy place of “social equality” in African-American thought. As we have seen, black aversion was reinforced by a sense that this alleged Holy Grail was, in varying measures, annoying, irrelevant, distracting, unreal, demeaning, and irredeemably tainted by the motives of those who kept the issue aboil. Few in black life mourned the passing of the term from public usage, as Jim Crow finally reached the end of its days.

Ultimately, the “social equality” problem resists easy placement within the larger scheme of black thought. Knowing where one stood on the relative merits of immediatism and gradualism, separatism and pluralism, or material uplift and civil rights, does not necessarily tell us where one stood on the “social equality question”; where, that is, one fell along the gamut from gentle disclaimers, to militant disclaimers, to bold endorsements, to utter avoidance of the topic. The outcry of “social equality” was simply too disconcerting, and unsettling, to permit so

tight a correlation: its motives, that is, were too suspect, and disreputable; its meanings, too vague, and irksome; its impacts, too poisonous, and injurious; the issues it roused within black thought, too troublesome, and contested.

That is why the trend towards redefining and embracing “social equality” never kept strict pace with the dawning of “New Negro” militancy. While these two developments were certainly related, they did not proceed in tandem. As we have seen, accommodationists of the Tuskegee tradition held no monopoly on “social equality” disclaimers; some of the more militant voices of black America issued them just as prolifically (albeit with often very different inflections). And even as the preponderance of response to “social equality” shifted from disclaimers to endorsements, the former continued to find expression among black commentators, including some leading champions of civil rights, political empowerment, and economic opportunity.

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This essay has endeavored to bring to light an old problem in African-American ideology, lively and long-lasting, if now largely forgotten: the quandary of how to address (or not address) the toxic suggestion that racial equality or black advancement would obliterate the social divide between black and white -- a notion that for generations went by the shorthand of “social equality.” This survey of black America’s encounter with “social equality” has featured no central actor, episode, or even narrative; rather, it has looked at many places and periods, groups and individuals. Yet there is, I have sought to show, a *story* to the problem of “social equality” in black thought, an evolving discourse marked by anguish and indignation, urgency and ambiguity, caginess and defiance. If only for the passions it once unleashed, it is a story that calls for attention. All the more, for its relevance to many strands of America’s black past. The

divergent responses to “social equality” outlined in these pages at once mirrored, and sharpened, a host of enduring issues in black politics -- issues residing in the classic tensions between assimilationism and nationalism, accommodation and militancy, the quest for stability and the quest for equality, the unifying power of race and the diversifying pressures of gender, class, region, and so forth.

Exploring how black discourse over “social equality” both reflected and shaped these wider tensions is of course a vast enterprise, one which the present essay only begins to address. A larger study to come will probe the historical interplay of “social equality” and black thought more fully. The purpose here has been to establish the importance, trace the contours, evoke the feel, and plot the historical trajectory of this once-consuming issue in black affairs. Just as no contemporary could escape the din of “social equality,” no serious history of the Jim Crow era can overlook the pressures it brought upon black America -- *or* the remarkable range and liveliness of black response.
