III. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL PROBLEMS IN NEGRO RESEARCH

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One of the basic reasons for the present unfortunate state of so much research on the Negro, and on related topics, is to be found in the problem of sources. Sources unknown. Sources inaccessible. Sources imperfectly exploited. Ever so often, one discovers with astonishment that some scholar has missed several relevant collections of documents; or that non-scholarly barriers have kept others from their materials; or that ineptness or bias has rendered so much labor of still others valueless for the purposes of scholarship.

Within the space of this brief discussion, a survey of recent productions in the fields under consideration is, of course, impossible. Nor is this necessary. Examples will occur to each specialist. What may be attempted with some profit is a statement of three of the major problems arising out of the use and need for sources, with one or two illustrations of each, and a plan for overcoming some of the difficulties.

A typical illustration of the scholar who works without knowledge of essential sources is furnished in the case of a writer engaged in preparing a definitive history of the anti-slavery movement in America who in a recent and otherwise excellent little book on the anti-slavery origins of the Civil War completely ignored the active participation of the Negroes themselves in the abolition movement. Upon inquiry, it was revealed that he was entirely unacquainted with sources such as the minutes of the many "national," regional and state conventions of the free people of color which were held from the 1830's through the 1860's. Yet quantities of these proceedings are located in the libraries of New York and elsewhere, and their significance is such that it is quite possible that a full examination of them will suggest a new point of view comparable in significance to the current one.

Evidence of the inaccessibility of known materials to a group of serious students may be found in the southern part of the United States. Here the Negro scholar is not only more often isolated
from his fellows than the white student but may actually be barred from his data. Elsewhere I have set down some of the details of the plight of the Negro scholar in the South. If he is a teacher, and he usually is, his classes are heavy; appropriations for his research are virtually nil, and the facilities in his own college library quite inadequate. Some state and municipal libraries will admit him; others will not. A few of the privately endowed institutions will permit individual Negroes to read "somewhere in the building"; many of them will not even do this. Inter-library loans may bring in certain of the books, but letters, manuscripts, and other rare items which are what he really needs, obviously, cannot be handled in this way. With the Negro and white scholars of the South separated from each other, and with the Negro scholar further handicapped by the social barriers to his documents, is there any wonder that so little is produced and so little of that little is of first quality?

Workers, white as well as Negro, suffer further from the inaccessibility of relevant materials located in Europe and, as Dr. Pattee has shown, in Latin America. For example, a study of the era of the French Revolution as concerns the Negro is literally worthless without the use of evidence to be found in France as well as in the West Indies. Yet the best study to date has failed to use the French records. Even in normal times the problem is a real one. The trip abroad is expensive. The available guides in this country to materials there are of doubtful assistance. The primary data are, ever so often, not even cataloged. Despite these social and natural barriers, the fact remains that the results of scholarship are inadequate without the use of just such sources. Some of the important collections are in the national archives of Spain, Portugal, France, and England; others consist of those records of the commercial companies and church missions which proved so influential in facilitating the expansion of Europe. The papers of the French abolitionists have been scarcely touched by American students. And in a city like Liverpool, which was built upon the slave trade and world commerce, there exists a veritable mine of source materials.

The third problem of sources is one of the most disheartening,
for here the sources are known and available, yet are ignored or only partially exploited. Consider, for example, the recently published volume, The Slavery Controversy, by Arthur Young Lloyd. This is the latest work on the subject. Accordingly, with the benefit of the previous spade work and the wealth of data now at hand, it should represent a notable contribution. Unfortunately, this is not so. Granting that Dr. Lloyd read the materials listed in his bibliography, the conclusion is inevitable that his social attitudes were such as effectively to block the satisfactory exploration of his sources.

Dr. Lloyd’s problem was to study two competing and conflicting propagandas—the pro-slavery and the anti-slavery. Here was an unusual opportunity to reveal the real interests behind the battle of verbal symbols; to analyze and compare the techniques of the opposing sides; to estimate the effectiveness of each; and finally, to relate these to the stream of historical development. Instead, Dr. Lloyd conceived his approach in terms of a North-South attack and defense. Normative and ethical judgments of the author creep in at every point. He has failed so completely to maintain the discipline of objectivity that he speaks of the “violence and injustice of the abolition attacks”; terms the movement in the North a hateful crusade; identifies the slave interest with the Southern people; and himself rises to the defense of slavery. This work, thus, must be re-done. This bare outline, perhaps, suggests a pattern which could be easily retraced in other fields.

Turning to some of the specific problems of sources, we must ask what can be done to improve the situation. It must be understood, of course, that these and other problems of the scholar are only segments of larger and deeper problems of our society. After all, research itself takes place within a social environment. Mannheim has made clear to all how the whole structure of assertion is influenced by the social structure. Events in Europe during the past decade have dramatized what we already knew, namely, that what we call objective scholarship is a rare and delicate flower, which is seldom allowed to bloom. Concretely, any
alert student of American life can explain the general lack of support, the encouragement of this type of research, the discouragement of that—and the other tendencies—in terms of relations and forces basic to the social order. Despite this fundamental consideration, which is never to be forgotten, there are several immediate steps which may be taken.

Let us review the problems of this paper in reverse order.

It is clear that the effective corrective for the neglect or distortion of sources is the development of a criticism which will insist upon vigorous standards of scholarship, and which will include scrutiny of the social philosophy explicit or implicit in a work. The whole question of bias in scholarship on the Negro needs a frontal rather than an oblique approach. Some of the specific studies we are all so interested in pursuing might well be delayed until some of the theoretical and methodological mistiness has been cleared up.

The social barriers to research in their particular application to the Negro scholar in the South may be attacked along several lines. It is to be noted that the statement of this problem as given above took account only of the use of documents. The difficulty becomes more complicated when we come to, say, the taking measurements of whites, which may be required of a Negro making a comparative study in physical anthropology, or when a Negro attempts the comparative analysis of the speech of whites and Negroes needed in linguistic studies, and the like. Laudable ingenuity has been exercised by several students in overcoming these hurdles. These devices include the employment of white colleagues and light-skinned Negroes; the exploitation of ties of kinship; alliances with janitors and domestic servants.

A great deal may be done through legal action. A thorough test of the arrangements which bar Negroes from tax-supported libraries and archives should clear the air. For privately endowed institutions, other methods suggest themselves. All scholars, in the South particularly, should be called upon to require that some arrangement be established and maintained whereby

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the Negro scholars shall have the benefit of the increasing deposits of data in the semi-public and private institutions of the region. If the Southern white scholars, who are so frequently bemoaning their own difficulties, are not scholars enough to support actively such an effort, then they should be condemned.

There are many suggestions that might be made for removing the barriers of space and communication. Three of them may be mentioned here.

1. There are about a half dozen important collections of Negro literature in this country—all suffering from a rather indifferent support. The largest of these collections could be immediately doubled with items of value equal to those now possessed, if the budget permitted.

2. There is a need for three guides to materials for the study of the Negro; one to the sources located in the United States; another to those in Latin-America; and the third to those in Europe.

3. Great aid is to be rendered by the advances in photographic techniques. Two projects that are coming up for immediate consideration elsewhere may interest this group. The first is to microfilm a few thousand books and manuscripts, otherwise unattainable, which are now located in Europe, as soon as war conditions permit. A survey will be made among interested scholars here and abroad to determine the most desirable materials, and the value of such a project is so obvious that comment is unnecessary. We have a preliminary and partial assurance that funds for this endeavor await the drawing up of a detailed plan and the cessation of military activities. The second project envisages the microfilming of all extant files of Negro newspapers printed in the United States prior to 1900. When we remember the difficulty of securing even single copies of Freedom’s Journal, The Rights of All, Fred Douglass’ Paper, La Tribune and others, the worth of this effort becomes manifest.

In concluding our summary statement of problems with these few suggestions for improvement, we might well repeat the old phrase, still not without some truth—a scholar’s work seldom rises above his sources.