

REPORT FROM LITTLE ROCK

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THE EXISTENCE OF A GROUP culturally and legally designated as inferior is experienced by whites as a *value*, but also as a *dis-value* and a *threat*. (By "whites," "upper-class whites," "lower-class whites," I mean of course "most Southern whites," "most upper-class Southern whites," etc.; I doubt very much that the prejudice of Northerners has the structure described here.) The existence of such an "inferior" group is experienced as a *value* especially by upper-class persons whose self-esteem is, from an early age, grossly inflated by knowledge of their own "superiority," and by the flattery extorted from (or, more rarely in recent times, volunteered by) members of the "inferior" group. In some degree, the existence of Negroes is so experienced by nearly all whites, but to lower-class whites the contempt expressed (e. g., in ironically excessive servility) by Negroes who identify with upper-class attitudes, is a terrible blow to self-esteem; the possibility that Negroes may compete successfully with them is an even worse threat. In reaction, this group requires repeated acts of self-humiliation from Negroes; in its ranks are the Negro-haters. For upper-class whites, the existence of Negroes is a very *pleasant* fact, unaccompanied by overt anxiety; foundational elements in their personality would be threatened by social recognition of Negro-white equality, but it is impossible to be self-aware of a threat of such magnitude, and these otherwise rational persons are oblivious to the emotional basis of their attitudes; their prejudice is rationalized so calmly as to appear susceptible to rational suasion. For lower-class whites, however, the existence of Negroes is a *very* ambiguous fact; their entrance into "white schools" raises the possibility that individual Negroes (or the whole body of Negro students) will excel one's own child, and thereby demonstrate that one is inferior to the group whose inferiority is so emphatically asserted. This is why segregation in transportation, where no competition is involved, is not a crucial issue, whereas the schools are nearly as sensitive a point as inter-marriage, that interpersonal act of equality which annihilates pretensions of racial hierarchy.

The form of the de-segregation conflict in Little Rock, the specific problems which arose, must be understood in reference to the character of the city and its peculiar relation to the state of Arkansas. In many ways, Little Rock is less a Southern city than a Mid-Western city situated at the geographical and cultural—but unfortunately not the political—boundary between the hills to the west and north and the plain to the east. Toward Oklahoma, in the direction of Van Buren and the State

University at Fayetteville, is a culture like Tennessee's: a small Negro population, no heritage of a "race problem," and no violent emotion about segregation. East Arkansas, a land of plantations, share-croppers, and poor agricultural workers, is similar to Mississippi; racial segregation, and even hatred of Negroes, is deeply rooted in culture and emotions, and admission of the children of the large Negro population to the "white schools" (and of whites to the "colored schools") is, for the white residents, an intolerable idea. Little Rock, as is well known, has a history of generally peaceful "race relations"; mainly a political city, very slightly industrial, with a small poor-white population, it has (at least in recent times) accepted segregational institutions *believingly* but not *passionately*. No doubt, segregation is what the white population prefers; no doubt, the presence of a designated inferior group is (unconsciously) experienced as part of their self-esteem system; this preference, this disposition, may be hard to give up, but it does not seem that these people feel an imperious need to make the world conform to their wishes. Asked to state their preference, the great majority votes for segregation; but the ballot did not ask, "How much does it mean to you?"

They are opposed to de-segregation—but willing to accept it. I put it in this order, because preference for segregation is the more conspicuous fact. But the problem of Little Rock is brought out more clearly if we reverse the order and say, "They are willing to accept de-segregation—but are opposed to it." If these are the facts, and if these facts cannot be changed, then only force can accomplish de-segregation, and the implications of this thought are very, very serious.

The Faubus phenomenon should be understood, primarily, as a politician's exploitation of the bitter segregationism of East Arkansas. It is possible that these people had accepted Faubus' presence in the Governor's Mansion only because their leaders knew, long before he showed his hand, what they could expect of him. Their political power would very likely have displayed itself, Orval E. Faubus or no—a point worth attention by those who see their problem in terms of an individual who betrayed the liberals who helped elect him; or by those inclined to hope for a "new" leadership in the Governor's office.

To put it most simply: In the fall of 1957, Little Rock was ready to accept—without eagerness—the first ultra-gradual step in school-desegregation. Immediately, the segregationist rural area, in the political form of Governor Faubus, opened warfare on the city, by calling

out the National Guard, by trying to inflame the moderate Little Rock segregationists, and by inciting outsiders to volunteer for Little Rock. I say, "put most simply," not because this misrepresents the attitude of most citizens, but because of certain notable ambiguities in the situation. The School Board, elected as non-segregationist, turned out to include two strong segregationists (one the more effective for being covert); the attitude of the Board as a whole, and of the Superintendent of Schools, can be characterized, charitably, as "lack of enthusiasm," manifested in Blossom's apologetic presentation of his "plan" to the citizenry, and in the Board's effort to shake off its legal obligation to admit Negroes to Central High, the moment the Faubus intervention commenced. One is entitled to speculate whether there was some degree of collusion between Faubus and segregationist elements in the business community deceived into thinking that some bluff and a mild show of force would painlessly exorcise the spirit of racial equality.

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Under Faubus' assault, it turned out that there were no forces within the city prepared or willing to resist it. From the start, the Faubus intervention had the effect of reminding Little Rock people, till then inclined to regard de-segregation as the law of the land and will of the nation, of their regional ties, their Arkansan and Southern identity. Some gave sympathy to the Faubus cause; the rest, stunned by the events, sat quiet and awaited the outcome. Those who heeded the slogan "law and order" did not augment the mob, but neither did they present any opposition to it.

In retrospect, one might ask whether a vigorous effort by liberal elements to transform some of the *passive submissiveness* to de-segregation into *positive acceptance* would have been superior to the slogan of "law and order" under which they attempted to unite the city. (By "liberal elements," I mean those leading figures such as Harry Ashmore of the *Gazette*, the considerable number of anti-segregationist ministers, and a few others; it is necessary to bear in mind that liberalism in Little Rock has *leaders*, and *influence*, but practically no *rank and file*.) Had there been a will to try it, the need for anything so drastic was unsuspected, apparently, by anyone outside the Faubus conspiracy; after the conflict broke out, the hope that the white community might be held together on a "moderate" basis, averting an extreme segregationist reaction, confirmed them in their course. But there was no will, either. Liberal Southerners (with the usual exceptions) seem to be characterized by a desire to retain the Southern ideal (of "separate but really equal") and to give in to *force majeure* with Southern graciousness, without conceding that their ideal was wrong. "Separate but equal"

(they say) was an intelligent idea wrecked by the irrationalities of other Southerners and the ungenerosity of the North. (They are mindful that the South has been a whipping-boy for those eager to lash out at injustice everywhere except at home. Economic pressures, such as the withholding of Federal funds or the threat to do so, have tended to increase resentment rather than to coerce the desired response.) These people, I am inclined to think, are so far aware that their affirmation of the old Southern ideal contradicts their allegiance to democracy and Christianity, that they truly desire the abolition of segregation; but they want to be *compelled* to give it up, so that they may retain as private faith that which they have come to abhor as public fact. Given such premises, one cannot go beyond "compliance," "law of the land," "law and order"—the position of the *Gazette* and nearly all the liberal ministers.

Hardly a voice was raised in behalf of de-segregation *per se*. The Negro community did not feel it could present its own case to the white people. Such a presentation can be made either by an individual with the rarest combination of powers, or through popular demonstrations. Such an individual was of course not present; and neither, apparently, was any spirit of non-violent direct action (I am not asserting that it could have been easily adapted to the problem of the schools). Little Rock Negroes, reliant on the power of the Federal Government, did not regard—and so far as I can tell, still do not regard—the support of elements in the white community as a matter of any *urgency*, more than merely desirable.

I am not raising the hard question—thinking again of liberal white persons—whether a heroic stand that risks everything is more efficacious than trying to move the whole community at a speed appropriate to it; that problem may have no general answer. In any case one can act heroically only on grounds one has wholeheartedly accepted. A few ministers now regret having uselessly compromised their moral and religious ideals of equality, and they now suggest that forthright defense of the aims of the Supreme Court, while unlikely to have averted the debacle, might have saved them from treacherous ground—reliance on the prestige of the Court, which proved very limited, and on the assistance of the President, which proved disastrous; and it might have crystallized a nucleus of outright anti-segregationist sentiment, resistant to demoralization. Whether this "might have been" appraisal is perspicacious or needlessly self-accusing is unimportant. Its significant suggestion is that unless Southern liberals can confront the issue of segregation, and arrive at a strong conviction, Southern liberalism may be permanently ineffectual in promoting "compliance," above all in the still more problematical Deep South. Where segregationist opposition is lacking (West Virginia was

such a case), passive acceptance, symbolized in "law and order," has proved adequate. When there is opposition, passive acceptance is no reed at all; the "school plan" collapses, and only Federal intervention fills the vacuum.

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The drift of the present argument leads to objection at just this point: "But the problem of de-segregation is the problem of the courts *from the very outset*. Those people have got to obey the law, and the only problem is just how to force them to obey." This is, substantially, the position of the NAACP, the Little Rock Negro community, and nearly all anti-segregationists. It is simple and plausible. As a working doctrine it is thrown into question by the poor answer it produced last fall (the troops), but—again as a working doctrine—it seems restored by the greater intelligence of the current Federal approach ("good faith" or no schools). I am taking the attitude of the Southern whites as of basic importance, and asking whether the possibility exists that some of these people will participate actively in the de-segregation process, whether there will emerge a minority to resist Faubus and his similars, or whether de-segregation will be achieved only in the degree, and at the speed, at which it can be imposed. The objection made at the beginning of this paragraph is that this is a pseudo-problem; that a positive attitude on the part of the white population is not essential, if they can only be brought to submit; or, to formulate the particular objection of Little Rock white sympathizers. "It is not necessary for *us* to do anything positive, only for the courts to make the others give in."

But consider several matters:

1. *The successfulness of integration.* The speed with which *general* de-segregation is accomplished—the speed with which the token nine-Negro "Blossom Plan" is transcended; the peaceableness of the ensuing educational setting (compared with last year's violence, which the school authorities were under community pressure to tolerate), the thoroughness with which a true integration of student bodies, and not the mere physical presence of Negro students in a white school is achieved—these matters are not subject to the will of courts, they are subject to local sentiment. That sentiment is affected (negatively and positively) by the choices made by legal authorities (troops, police, closing of the schools, etc.), but it is also formed by the interplay of *all* the forces and commitments within the situation.

2. *The uncertainty of the effect of Federal acts.* When the locality fails to "work out its problems," to accept the opportunity presented by the Supreme Court to adapt the de-segregation process to the locality, the effects of intervention are extremely problematical. Of the Little Rock case, I will speak shortly; of the Deep

South, I have found very few people able to imagine the success of forced compliance there. Failure by the Federal Government to exert pressure is, of course, interpreted as encouragement to resist; but pressure reinforces the familiar sense of persecution. Without the Supreme Court decision of 1954, the pace of de-segregation might be considerably slower than it has been; but the influence of the court may be reaching its territorial limits.

3. *The desirability of local solutions.* One of the serious problems in America is lack of local initiative in local problems. This may (partly) have inspired the Court to rule that each locality should develop its own "plan." Any earnest effort in a locality to face, and solve, problems has the tendency to restore some vitality, and to reduce the omnipresent tendency of high agencies of government to take control. "Community" is a word that can have extremely false connotations in respect to a city like Little Rock, divided by "race" and also by the sharp economic divisions which religious leaders studiously refrain from mentioning; but this does not make Federal management of local affairs the less repugnant.

4. *The desirability of confronting the moral dilemma.* To the extent that the white community rejects responsibility for de-segregation, it avoids the moral confrontation referred to earlier. It is hard to show, but it is my strong suspicion that revitalizing of Southern life depends on such a confrontation. In the light in which I have presented Southern liberalism, it seems to have no *capacity* for such an act; perhaps there is a way out.

5. *De-segregation in broad perspective.* I have referred to "local vitality" (3), "revitalizing the South" (4). Thereby I have touched only the surface of the relation between attitudes in the struggle against racist institutions, and the general struggle against injustice. That there should be no special deprivations based on skin color, is obvious and I present no argument for it. But the way of life of the hitherto-"privileged" race—in the North and in the South—is shot through with its own deprivations, falsifications, and violence, its own insensitivity, selfishness, stupidity. Every time a group of people comes together and earnestly considers how they can take responsibility for creating, in their neighborhood, or school, or social group, human relations free of racial discrimination, and free of falsification, insensitivity and the rest; whenever a group of Negroes and whites meets together as a human group, in which the skin-color and ancestry of individuals is a fact so trivial as rarely to be noticed; whenever *one individual* takes upon himself the responsibility for trying to actualize that which he believes in; whenever *one solitary individual* speaks forth from desire and love—each time, a bit of the racism is destroyed, but also, each time, a

bit of the fabric of ugliness is destroyed and a revolution in the ways of society is begun. To "let the courts do it," is simply to renounce all this.

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Following Faubus' intervention last fall, the internal situation became worse and worse; it will be valuable to review what the Federal Government contributed to this deterioration. Anti-segregationists now disassociate themselves from the military enforcement, but of course the dispatch of troops was regarded in nearly all such quarters as necessary and sure to be effective. This was a very honest bad guess in a fairly desperate situation; beneath the bad guess lay, however, a failure to grasp the meaning which the troops would have for the white residents.

Most superficially, the troops provided slogans for segregationists—Occupied Arkansas, New Reconstruction. From this followed the resentment one would expect. But beyond this: the presence of the troops dramatically confirmed the segregationist dominance: it took the U. S. Army to wrest the city from them (so it seemed). From this, a handwagon effect; those who go with the stronger party could see the illusory nature of the de-segregationist strength; the Army could put Negroes in Central High but such "integration" is more technical and juridical than real. A third effect, more complex, was feelings of guilt, and resentment at accusation; this tended to unite all of Little Rock as a persecuted Southern city. Unlike ordinary police enforcement—the arrest of individual law-violators—the presence of the troops would seem to have had the effect of causing *each person*, no matter how lawfully or even meritoriously he behaved, to be a member of a collective group (the city) against which the accusation of desire to commit violence was being made. The dispatch of soldiers ensured the presence of nine Negro youngsters in the school, but relieved everyone of any sense of positive obligation—the school authorities to guard the internal school atmosphere, for example—and progressively reduced identification with the "general will" expressed by the Court.

In this atmosphere, the "Southern" position into which the hitherto uncommitted were pulled became ever stronger, and the isolated anti-segregationists became increasingly demoralized. The issue of the Little Rock plan vs. the state of Arkansas became the issue of the state vs. the Federal Government; and the new sentiment was confirmed in Faubus' sweeping electoral victory in July, in which localities which would not ordinarily consider segregation a significant campaign platform, supported (so they thought) the state of Arkansas. The completeness of the rout was indicated by Ashmore's despairing support of the School Board's new petition for postponement, in the somewhat forlorn hope that

time alone would return the city to normal. Indeed, time alone would do that. Already once again it is a friendly peaceful city, in which Northerners (if they are white) are most courteously received. But time alone does not solve the problem of how an individual (or group) can be expected to perform an act he doesn't particularly care to do, against determined, and even violent, opposition. At this point, if the schools are not to be de-segregated by force at the end of an indefinite period without schools, what is needed is not the *normality* of the city, but the realization by a significant minority of a *will* to de-segregate. Until recently this has appeared Utopian, a characterization which the landslide result of the September 27 referendum seems to confirm. But the closing of the schools has revealed Little Rock attitudes in a new light.

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The segregationists offer (or pretend to offer) to sacrifice the public schools. In view of the foreseen fact that the courts will not allow public funds to support pseudo-public schools, there are only a few ways of making sense of segregationist strategy:

1. Certain segregationist leaders, it may be, are going through motions of resistance, without hope of victory, for the sake of present and future votes.
2. Or it may be their hope that a strong show of resistance will weaken enforcement-sentiment in the North—with the prospect of favorable compromise (communities like Little Rock are "expendable" from this point of view); it may even be calculated that "the North" will make *generous* offers, to deter these oppressed segregationists from their proposed collective suicide.
3. Or it may be that there is no method, only the madness of prejudice and political commitments.

The most serious problems are raised by the second possibility, of a "strike" calculated to last long enough to force a compromise. In Little Rock, however, it turns out that all the pressure is being felt by the segregationists—and assuming no piece of folly from the Federal Government, this is likely to continue. The segregationists have recruited an "army" without morale for an offensive requiring sacrifices; at the same time, opposition is generated from among those who had lapsed into silence, and from a small number who, because of the sacrifices demanded of them, have begun to re-examine their allegiance. After victories, Little Rock segregationism is still not a firm, resolute bloc.

At a public rally of the Capital Citizens Council which I attended, there was a respectable turnout (something over 1000 people in a city of 125,000). However:

1. The audience was composed mainly of older people (over 35).
2. It came in a good-natured mood, gave rapt attention to sexual "revelations," but never reached a point of enthusiasm.
3. The orator of the evening (a

fair exemplar of the Southern style) eventually wearied his audience, some of whom muttered about the dullness of statistics. 4. A considerable number (perhaps as many as 100) walked out even before the peroration. The audience, as I saw it, did not come in order to be told that Nigras are inferior (this they knew), but to be told how the private school hocus pocus could possibly work (this was even before the vote). If they get no satisfaction on this point (they got none that night) there did not seem to be many in the thousand ready to lay down their lives, or the education of their children, for *this* lost cause.

The problem is, how to generate a positive anti-segregationist sentiment to oppose a segregationism which remains without a profound faith in its convictions. One finds among adult whites very little basis for such a positive sentiment. One finds hope that salvation will descend from somewhere—from “firm leadership” in Washington or in the city. (A pathetic instance is the wish to deny that Ashmore changed his position.) During the campaign for the vote, the Women’s Emergency Committee to Open the Schools (on a de-segregated basis) carried on the first organized effort to mobilize sentiment; there is a bare possibility that the taking of even a moderate stand under the favorable conditions of a campaign for votes will have some momentum; there is a possibility, perhaps more reliable, that some of these people will be able to influence the attitudes of business leaders, who can hardly be thoroughly enchanted with the pass to which Faubus has brought them. But it would seem foolish to base hopes on a group which entertains no expectations of itself.

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The students are another story. Recently, a pro-segregationist, anti-school group of Central High students became active—a motorcade around the city by a “rowdy” “rock ‘n’ roll” crowd. I characterize the group this way, only in order to suggest that a chance to raise hell, and not convictions, is the only basis for recruiting a segregationist student crowd in Little Rock.*

By contrast, the students taking a stand under the slogan “we want the schools open, *even* if they have to be integrated,” did not give the impression of being emotionally-whipped-together. It was not possible to talk with them long and believe that they were yield-

ing to integration only for the sake of their education (as they seemed to be saying); segregation is something to which they are either indifferent or (in a few cases) definitely opposed. (Some of them suggested opening a voluntarily-integrated school which, whether they realized it or not, would represent a much more extensive integration than Blossom’s token-plan.) The active group, it should be said, was not at Central High, but at Hall High, a school with a higher-income level of parents, and with only a small Negro population within the district. The main difference between the active students and the rest of their school seemed to be that most of the former had some support from parents, and therefore little to fear from being publicly identified; they felt they had the silent support of their fellow-students. Their absolute lack of fear of reprisals from the other students seemed to verify their estimation of their colleagues. The absence of a comparable group at Central High probably signified that there were not enough students with parental support; it did not mean that many would not speak out for “opening the schools” if parental opposition (and fear of reprisals against parents) were not strong. It is not arbitrarily that I choose to interpret one “screen” slogan (such as “law and order”) as defeatist, and another (the students’ “open the schools”) as positive in tendency. In the first case, we have an excessively moderate stand adopted deliberately by mature adults; in the other, an initial taking of position by young people still learning to understand themselves and their environment.

I would rather not exaggerate. But it seems perfectly clear that *if there is* a positive force against segregation within Little Rock, it is surely not among the adults, but among young people. They are growing up in a time when Southern parochialism is diminishing under the influence of world wars, national mass media, and increasing immigration of Northerners whose children have a Southern accent but no true Southern background; it should occasion no surprise if they have failed to acquire the convictions of their elders, or feel so little confirmed in them as to be able to give them up.

One is led to consider, first of all, whether these students have parallels in many places in the South where no signs have appeared (such signs have of course not been confined to Little Rock). And then, if these attitudes are not uncommon, one is led to wonder if the necessary encouragement can be given these young people, to continue to think their problems through, to the point where they can become a strong influence in their communities. There are not many things which will move adults, whose convictions are habit and whose prejudices have intra-psychic necessity; one thing which may move them, is the presentation of a resolute new way by a younger generation. Is it possible to give these young people the necessary encouragement? The

* Unaware of the motorcade, I happened to go out into the street just as it was breaking up. I encountered a group of a half-dozen boys ditching a car and tearing the banners off it—all very furtively and in a hurry to be away. This was their reaction to the fact that another car had hit an elderly pedestrian (this dispersed the motorcade). Their manner was not that of believers in anything, but of kids who had gone out to tear up the town and had been a little too successful.

question is crucial, but I am not sure I have met any adults capable of giving that encouragement.**

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Earlier I spoke of the fact that the Negroes have not felt support from the white community to be a matter of any urgency, and have developed no means of "presenting their case" directly. This is very understandable. They have little reason, from past history, to entertain expectations of their white co-citizens, and inventing means of communication under such difficulties is not a matter of "duty," it is almost a matter of genius (individual or collective). One does not find—at least, unless one scratches much deeper than I did—any signs of comprehension of "non-violent direct action," or any spontaneous, non-theoretical recognition of such possibilities. The Montgomery bus-boycott had resonance in the form of awareness of a remarkable "leader"; it did not lead to consideration of the nature and meaning of the Montgomery method. "Non-violence," in the sense of non-retaliation, is constantly urged by the leaders of the Negro community, particularly by ministers. Presented in this way, the idea is not dynamic, it does not lead on to thoughts of action; it is suggestive of passive acceptance of injustice, something of which Negroes have had quite enough. Whatever the reasons, those few people who have tried to spread the idea of direct action seem to have had no success at all. This may mean only that, in the specific local conditions, it is a hard idea to comprehend. Or it may signify also that there is something fundamentally wrong with the methods by which these ideas have been presented, and with the context in which they have been presented. If Negroes in Little Rock, or elsewhere in the South, are able to develop means to "present their case"—or, as in Montgomery, to present to white persons the fact of their dignity, their solidarity, in short their humanity—they may be able to make a strong contribution to their own cause, which is a part of the cause of all of us.

**The young people badly need education to counteract their very undemocratic education—the effect of living in an atmosphere in which the ordinary democratic niceties are frequently ignored. From fear that a well-worked-out plan will go astray, that a carefully-written resolution will be unwisely amended, that opposition will show itself and disrupt solidarity, they are capable of doing very foolish things. In part this is simply a question of lack of experience, but the justification "That's the way the other side does it" reveals the kind of image of society that the older generations have passed on to the younger.

A MAN FROM GEORGIA

As to this dirty broken man from Georgia weeping and with a bandaged head, I gave my pipe to smoke and thirty cents for breakfast, neighborly words without disdain, but not a bath nor clothing nor a ticket home nor useful information—so myself in need, I get thirty cents of affection: thus much I have in me to give and get.

I saw him later, washed and not too bad, but drunk on apple-wine: "Hey, I know you, you're the good guy," he said, "the first New Yorker ever gave me a nickel. Thanks a lot, sir, and have a drink." I drank it without grace, to not offend. I am even more confused about my role and the nature of things and what is the meaning of our actions.

And yet I know that life is simple; hard but simple; that it is not complicated and hard, but very simple and very hard. I don't think any one would say, to live is easy; though to some, I can imagine living which is to me horribly hard is just that easy, but they wouldn't say so, they wouldn't say anything.

Bitterly he told me how three niggers knocked him down and took three dollars of him. No doubt they did, and no doubt he provoked them. "I thought," he said, "when I came to New York I'd be a big shot. Lyin there like that like a shitty tramp. They left me in the gutter to die," he wept, "bleedin." I remained impassive, cheerful, optimistic.

Paul Goodman