
The Economic Basis of the Tulsa Race Riot

by Elmer T. Allison

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As one cannot understand any great social change or manifestation without a true conception of the economic basis for such, so, neither can one understand any lesser social phenomenon without understanding the economic basis in which its causes find root, and out of which it springs.

The Tulsa race riot of 2 weeks ago is a case in point. The riot did not “just happen.” There were very clear and definite causes for that outburst of savagery; causes which in the main now reveal themselves as economic in character. Not difference of color, nor creed, nor race can account for it.

To attempt to separate the Negro race from the economic development of the United States in the early period of its settlement would be a witless procedure. The entire “civilization” of the far greater portion of this country was at that time based and grounded upon the slavery of the Negro. To understand the early period of this country’s development one must not fail to reckon with the foundation upon which its economic, civil, and moral superstructure was built — chattel slavery.

Ten million inhabitants of a country, even of the extent of the United States, bound together by ties of race, historical development, and similarity of economic and social status, cannot be readily divorced from any calculation of social forces of that country.

And it would be entirely erroneous to attempt such on the basis of the larger freedom granted the Negro since the Civil War. His changed relation to his masters and to the white society is an almost fictitious one, especially in the South where his greatest numbers still live and labor. The Negro race is linked up with unbreakable bonds (economic) with the white civilization. The labor of these millions is still peremptorily necessary in the realm of King Cotton and even in various basic industries of the North.

White capitalist society is as clearly in a conspiracy against the Negro here as is any pogrom-ridden Eastern nation against the Jews. Here the lynching bee and the race riot, there the pogrom. The causes are the same as are, too, the results. The American Negro — and we must not forget that he is as truly American as any of the whites, more so than many of



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them — who attempts to raise himself and family into a higher plane of life and social position is always damned and often doomed by the white society which dominates the country. The Negro who is content remains a “nigger” — and a vassal of the whites is held in the veriest contempt; but let him simulate the human aspirations of the white race for the larger life and then to this contempt of the whites is added a bloodthirsty desire for vengeance which at any moment may break upon his head.

Upon such a shifty foundation rested the lives and liberties of thousands of Negro men, women, and children at Tulsa when the White Vengeance swept their homes, and many of them as well, out of existence in a whirlwind of fury.

The main purpose and object of all white aggressions upon the Negro are to KEEP HIM DOWN, down under the feet of the white rulers, the white laws, the white politicians, the white masters. Anything which will reduce the Negro to this place and keep him there as dirt beneath the feet of his masters is good in the eyes of white civilization. As long as the Negro will consent to stay down, the bloodthirstiness of the whites may be appeased by only an occasional sacrificial offering of a black man or woman.

The magnet of industrial development drew many thousands of Negroes into the Northern and Western parts of the country during the war. Postwar conditions favored the retention of them north of the Mason-Dixon line. The opening of oil fields and the high prices for cotton were active agencies in attracting large numbers of them to the Southwest. High wages, high cotton prices, luck in the oil gamble made many of them comparatively well-to-do. Negroes established themselves in business competing with white firms. Negro newspapers were established, Negro organizations grew. They settled down in that section as an established portion of the inhabitants.

Business interests establish the current thought

upon any public matter, whether it is the floating of a to-be-discounted 20% Liberty Loan, or a decision upon adopting a scientific formula for conserving human life. Business, through its publicity and legal organisms, has the first and last say. The “lower classes” have little force in deciding anything. Whether white or black they are only the implements of the bourgeoisie.

It was the white business interests that fomented the Tulsa riot. Whatever differences there may have been between white workers and black workers on account of undercutting of wages by Negroes because of unemployment, it must not be assumed that these differences counted for anything with the white master class, except as an implement of possible use against the Negroes when the whites chose to bring the mob into action. The business depression rendered the Negroes more of a menace than an asset to the white interests. The trap was sprung.

The Tulsa riot was the fruit of a long-brewing trouble, not unexpected in some quarters. Many instances of white aggression upon Negro rights can be cited in proof of this. Negroes holding land upon which oil was struck were forced to sell to whites, were driven out of the country. Notices were stuck upon Negroes' houses warning them of white vengeance if they remained in that section. Many and various obstacles were placed in the way of Negro advancement. Violations of legal rights became the order of the day where Negroes were concerned. The Negroes were becoming an established competitive factor to white business. And because of it they were outlawed, and the sentence of death passed upon them. The riot ensued.

Whatever immediate circumstance set off the explosion that has found an echo of condemnation wherever men really think, down at the bottom must be recognized these fundamental causes, economic in nature, which are ineradicable as long as the present capitalistic system shall last.

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