

# Progressive-Era Racism and Another ‘Blaming the Victim’ Narrative: Thomas Nixon Carver’s “Make the Name ‘N\*gger’ Honorable” (1905)

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**Abstract:** This note reproduces a brief article by Thomas Nixon Carver, a leading Progressive Era American economist on what was then called the ‘Negro Question’. This virtually unknown piece represents a striking instance of blaming the victim for her/his condition which is to be found in the economic literature of the period.

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**JEL Classification:** B25, J15

American Progressive-era social scientists dealt with racial problems in various contexts and under different perspectives, generally casting ‘race’ as a euphemism for Black/White interactions.<sup>1</sup> Economists, broadly conceived, were particularly prolific in this regard. “In the period between 1890 and 1908”, Malcolm Rutherford (2023) notes, “American economists produced a number of substantial pieces on aspects of what was then commonly called ‘race problems’ or ‘The Negro Problem’”.<sup>2</sup> These included books such as Richmond Mayo-Smith’s *Emigration and Immigration* (1890), which contained a section on the “negro and the foreigner”, and Walter F. Willcox and Alfred H. Stone’s *Studies in the American Race Problem* (1908). A series of significant papers appeared in the American Economic Association Publications series, in the Quarterly Journal of Economics, and in the Annals of the American Academy

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<sup>1</sup> The focus of this note is on Black/White relations, but during those years publications on race problems also included commentaries on Asian and Southern-Eastern European immigrants, which were explicitly tied up in racism and eugenic thought.

<sup>2</sup> This article was unpublished and without page numbers.

of Political and Social Science.<sup>3</sup> “As these various works clearly demonstrate”, Rutherford (2023) writes, “the bulk of the profession adopted ideas and arguments either assuming or purporting to show the racial and cultural inferiority of Black people relative to Whites”. Evidence of this connection abounds. Some, like Frederick L. Hoffman (1896) and Joseph A. Tillinghast (1902), regarded Blacks’ innate indolence, fickleness, and inefficiency as justifying slavery. Given these hereditary ‘instincts’, they continued, Blacks could hardly withstand the rigid discipline of the modern factory and were destined to fail away. Others considered Blacks not only unfit for industry, but also incapable of intellectual progress (Bushee 1903). John R. Commons (1907) held that Blacks’ innate inferiority could not be remedied by a process of assimilation, but only through interbreeding with other superior races. Some others argued that Blacks were more susceptible to certain diseases and found an explanation for it in the pre-slavery climatic and genetic conditions of the Africans (Darity 1994).

These are just a few telling examples of the blatant racism which permeated Progressive-era social science discourse. Racism, however, can (and has) assume(d) far more subtle forms: a significant example of one of its most insidious versions is provided by Thomas Nixon Carver’s essay, which is reproduced at the end of this introduction. This short note is virtually unknown—it was published in 1905 in *Alexander’s Magazine*, a minor Black periodical which circulated in the Boston area, and, interestingly, Carver decided not to include it in the full bibliography of his writings (1949).<sup>4</sup> One of the aspects which makes this piece significant is that, at the time it appeared in print, Carver was a rising star in the American social sciences. Three years before, he had left Oberlin College to join the department of economics at Harvard, where he was assigned the teaching of both political economy and sociology. As a competent theorist, Carver played a crucial role in the consolidation and refinement of marginalism in the United States.<sup>5</sup> He served as president of the American Economic Association in 1915 and, together with Frank Taussig, he became the backbone of the doctoral program at Harvard (Fiorito and Erasmo 2022). As a sociologist, Carver developed a

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed literature survey, see Darity (1994), Leonard (2016), Rutherford (2023).

<sup>4</sup> The only reference to Carver’s piece we could find in the literature is in Wilson J. Moses’ *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (1978, 215).

<sup>5</sup> “Among theoretical writings of importance”, Joseph Schumpeter (1954, 836) observed, “the one that comes nearest to developing Clarkian doctrine is Carver’s”.

biology-infused approach to social evolution which openly embraced scientific racism and eugenics (Fiorito and Orsi 2017). The prescribed reading list for his ‘Theories of Social Progress’ course in 1903–1904 contained eugenics-oriented studies, such as Richard L. Dugdale’s *The Jukes* (1877) and Francis Galton’s *Hereditary Genius* (1869), as well as manifestly racist volumes, like Edmond Demolins’ *Anglo-Saxon Superiority* (1898) and William Z. Ripley’s *The Races of Europe* (1899).<sup>6</sup> Remarkably, the publication of Carver’s collected *Essays in Social Justice* (1915), was hailed as “a very important step in the coordination of the various sciences which make up applied eugenics” (*Journal of Heredity* 1917, 120).

Carver’s interest in racial issues and his academic status plausibly explain why he was invited to participate in a conference on the ‘Position of the Negro in the city’, held at the Boston South End House on April 27, 1905. A summary of the conference appeared in the inaugural issue of *Alexander’s Magazine* (Daniels 1905).<sup>7</sup> The program consisted of a number of short communications on special topics, followed by a general discussion. In addition to Carver, participants included prominent Boston figures such as Butler Roland Wilson, attorney and civil rights activist; Rev. Henry J. Callis, former slave and minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; Olivia Ward Bush-Banks, author and poet of Black and Native American heritage; Joseph Lee, social worker, eugenicist and a major financial supporter of the Immigration Restriction League; and Mary White Ovington, suffragist, journalist, and co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Charles Alexander, founder and editor of Alexander’s magazine also attended the conference. While virtually all speakers dealt with concrete aspects of the Blacks’ condition in Boston—such as unemployment, access to housing and the higher professions—Carver spoke on “the general question of recognition of race” (42). As we read in the report, “he thought the Negro should not try to unrace himself in name or in fact, but should endeavor to make his race one to be proud of. He should not ‘kick against the pricks’ and waste his efforts, but should recognize

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<sup>6</sup> Harvard University, Examination Papers 1873–1915. Box 7, Bound volume. Harvard University Archives. The Theories of Social Progress syllabus can be found on Irwin Collier’s website: <https://www.irwincollier.com/harvard-course-readings-final-exams-and-enrollment-for-principles-of-sociology-carver-and-field-1904-1905/>

<sup>7</sup> *Alexander’s Magazine* started publication on May 15, 1905, in Boston, offering to take up “important events and questions of vital and present-day interest and give its readers the outcome of calm, deliberate, and critical thought” (Henderson 1905, 41).

facts as they are and make the best of them” (Daniels 1905, 42). This succinct description is more perplexing than enlightening, but Carver’s stance was shortly made crystal-clear. The second issue of Alexander’s Magazine hosted a brief article by Carver, under the title ‘Make the Name ‘Nigger’ Honorable’, based on the speech he had given at the conference.

Carver’s piece is one of most striking instances of blaming the victim for his condition which is to be found in the economic literature of the period. Those were years in which negative attitudes about Blacks solidified and extant conditions for Blacks worsened. The wholesale disfranchisement of Southern Black voters was occurring at that time, as did the rise and triumph of Jim Crow.<sup>8</sup> As one interpreter (Logan 1965, 47) remarked long ago, “the Progressive Era marked the ‘nadir’ of African American life after emancipation”. In his note (*infra*), Carver deliberately ignored the active force and result of the then-rampant racism, and while blaming Blacks for defective thoughts and habits, he was fully reluctant to indict racist attitudes and practices of Whites. He reproached Blacks for having failed to develop those feelings of “race pride and race solidarity” which are necessary for any social group to attain an “honorable” position. “Instead of race pride”, he complained, “there is an undue sensitiveness on the subject, and something bordering very closely on shame” (42). This is evident from the fact that a considerable number of Blacks seek to distinguish themselves from their fellows of color and strive to integrate into White circles. While not necessarily harmful in itself, Carver stated, when considered in relation to race development, this is a “fact to be lamented” (47). Carver also pointed out the tendency among Blacks to judge their actions by the standard set by the White race. What they should do instead, he complained, is to cultivate their own morals and ideals, and “not be satisfied until they have lived up to those standards” (47). Finally, Carver criticized the widespread sentiment that leads so many Blacks to firmly oppose any label or designation that separates them from society at large. “Why should a Colored man resent the name of ‘Nigger?’”—he wondered. “True it is a term of derision” (47), he admitted. But, again, he was silent on the fact that

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<sup>8</sup> From the end of the Reconstruction in 1877 through the early years of the 20th century, African Americans in the South faced tremendous obstacles toward voting, including poll taxes, literacy tests, and other bureaucratic restrictions. They also risked harassment, intimidation, economic reprisals, and physical violence when they tried to register or vote. See Perman (2001) for an excellent historical reconstruction.

'Nigger' was an epithet inherently related to the prevailing atmosphere of exclusion and intimidation against Blacks.<sup>9</sup> The word was usually employed to designate those inferior accommodations assigned to Blacks, such as balcony 'Nigger heavens' in theatres and 'nigger cars' on railroad trains (McGerr 2003, 188). With an ill-concealed patronizing tone, Carver invited Blacks to "absolutely cease paying attention to names and devote their energies to the task of making whatever name is given them an honorable one" (47). This could only be done by "adopting a standard of conduct and an ideal of life for the Colored race", and "seeing to it that it is a higher standard and a higher ideal, if possible, than the white race itself lives up to" (47) (Carver's aside, "if possible", is worth noting). As a devoted Methodist, he concluded by drawing a parallel between the condition of Blacks in America and that of early Christians. The term Christian was initially used in a derogatory sense, but once the early followers of Christianity accepted it with honor, and "lived lives which in the course of time compelled respect and admiration" (47), it lost its original connotation and came to be a "proud" title.

One could well object that Carver did not state that Blacks are in any way inferior and that his exhortations toward Black pride may have been inspired by a genuine egalitarian sentiment. After all, it should be added, Alexander (a Black himself) reacted positively to Carver's note. As he put it in his own journal:

We rather like the unique view taken by Professor Carver ... Among the more intelligent members of the race there is going on at the present time a debate as to which of the three most popular names should be used: Negro, Colored or Afro-American. The time wasted in useless debate could be more profitably employed in making whatever name is given us respected and honored in the land. (Alexander 1905a, 21)

Alexander's approval for Carver calls for some contextualization.<sup>10</sup> Alexander was a well-known figure in Black journalism: he started working as a correspondent for the Reflector newspaper in the early 1890s, founded and edited the Monthly Review in 1894 and 1895, and contrib-

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<sup>9</sup> On the history and usage of the term 'Nigger', see Kennedy (2002).

<sup>10</sup> I am deeply indebted to two anonymous referees for pointing out the Washington-Alexander nexus discussed below and for suggesting a better assessment of Alexander's overall stance.

uted a number of articles to the Colored American magazine, as well as a number of other Black periodicals (Schneider 1995). In 1899, when he joined the Tuskegee Institute to teach printing, Alexander came under the influence of Booker T. Washington, the famous Black leader and educator. Washington called on him in 1903 to help his cause by editing the Colored Citizen, a newspaper in Boston.<sup>11</sup> When the Colored Citizen collapsed within a year, in spite of Washington's substantial financial support, Alexander converted it into the Alexander's Magazine. The journal openly espoused Washington's accommodationist and gradualist views in race relations.<sup>12</sup> This was reflected in its emphasis on vocational and industrial education, its insistent critique of unionism and civil rights agitation, and, more generally, in its implicit acceptance of the segregated structure of society (Fultz 1995, Schneider 1997). On this Washington's imprinting, Alexander impressed his own mark. In his editorials and in the contributions he invited, noted Tom Pendergast (2000, 87), Alexander provided his readers with a portrait of Black accomplishment inspired by the principles of white Victorian masculinity: "self-control, self-reliance, character, honesty, integrity, hard work, and investment are repeatedly hailed as the keys to success". What makes Alexander's invocation of these traits so interesting, continues Pendergast, is his resistance to mentioning the constraints that limited Black social and professional uplift. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Alexander aligned with Carver's plea to honorability and 'self-help' as crucial factors for emancipation. As Alexander (1905b, 44) put it in one of his editorials, "in life or in any of the pursuits of life very much depends on the foundation and by this we really mean character, for character is the foundation of life". And this character can be forged by accepting the denial of certain basic social and political rights in exchange for the opportunity for Blacks to develop a separate, subordinate society without interference whatsoever from Whites. This is where Alexander and Carver converged.

A brief look at Carver's later ruminations on race, however, casts serious doubts about his real motivation. Strangely enough, Carver only briefly addressed the 'Negro Problem' in the subsequent years, offering

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<sup>11</sup> With the Colored Citizen, Washington intended to contrast William Monroe Trotter's Boston Guardian, which was proving one of his harshest critics. Trotter was a real estate businessman based in Boston, and a prominent activist for Black civil rights.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander's Magazine regarded both Trotter and W. E. B. Du Bois as opponents, but never fairly engaged them or their ideas in open intellectual fight (Schneider 1997).

just a few fleeting remarks on the subject.<sup>13</sup> He did support and advocate eugenics and its practices (Carver 1929, 1931), but his arguments were always phrased in non-racialistic terms. Only in his last major work, *The Essential Factors of Social Evolution* (1935), did he offer some hints on his views about race which allow us to better identify his position. Among these ‘essential factors’, Carver did include the biological and racial characteristics of the individuals. “The eugenic or dysgenic effects of race mixing are still under investigation”, he wrote, and it is possible that, at some future date, “it may be found that certain race mixtures produce desirable crosses and others not” (444–445). However, “until we can determine with some degree of certainty by scientific experimentation or observation just what race mixtures are favorable and what are unfavorable ..., the safer policy seems to be to maintain racial purity” (*ibid.*). This makes the problem of race relations an “extremely complicated one” (451). Where two distinct racial groups are already separated geographically, it is advisable to maintain that territorial separation. When this is not feasible, or where the migration has already taken place, Carver suggested a partial separation, or “segregation”—“this means a ghetto, a ‘Chinatown’, Negro quarters, or some other form of localization” (451). This may not be a “satisfactory solution”, Carver was willing to admit, but “from a eugenic standpoint” (*ibid.*) it is still to be preferred to racial amalgamation. Carver did not conceal his skepticism regarding the prospects of social amalgamation. He was cautious enough to assert that “it is probably safer not to assume that one race is, in any absolute sense, superior to another” (452). Yet, he considered it quite conceivable that racial groups differ in their adaptability to different environments—“a race which developed in an African environment would presumably have become somewhat better adapted to that than to an entirely different environment” (451), he stated. Ultimately, Carver appears to be still anchored to the typically Progressive-era belief that the process of assimilation involves some form of race-specific ca-

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<sup>13</sup> Writing on the “negro question in the South”, Carver observed: “While all whites are agreed in their opposition to anything savoring of social equality, there is absolute disagreement, according to conflicting class interests, upon other points. The land-owning and employing classes regard the negro as a necessity, while the small farmers, mechanics, and others who work with their own hands are fairly unanimous in desiring to get rid of him altogether. The economist who looks at the matter objectively will hesitate a long time before he pronounces in favor of one rather than the other point of view.” (Carver 1908, 113) Carver did not even mention the possibility of taking into consideration the ‘Negro’ point of view.

capacity to absorb social culture. In his view, “this may explain every known fact regarding the difficulty which the Negro, the Indian, or the Malay has in adjusting himself to the white man’s civilization” (451). Carver’s racism eventually came to the surface—and this at a time in which arguments from biological determinism in the social sciences had considerably fallen into disrepute (Asso and Fiorito 2004).

**“MAKE THE NAME ‘N\*GGER’ HONORABLE”<sup>14</sup>**

Thomas Nixon Carver:

There is no instance in history of a race that has achieved an honorable position in the world until it had developed a feeling of race pride and race solidarity. In my opinion the greatest present weakness of the Colored race in America is the lack of this feeling. Instead of race pride, there is an undue sensitiveness on the subject, and something bordering very closely on shame. This is shown by the fact that many members of the Colored race desire to separate themselves from other members of the same race, and to force their way into association with members of the white race. There may be no harm in this considered by itself, but when we consider it in connection with the general problem of race development it is a fact to be lamented.

Another symptom of the same weakness is the frequent attempt of Colored men to judge the actions of their own race by the standard set by the white race. If, for example, it is said that there is immorality among the Colored people, the statement is frequently resented and the question is asked, Is there not also immorality among the white race? This indicates that such people are satisfied if the Colored people merely live up to the standard set by the white people. Instead of that they ought to have standards and ideals of their own, and not be satisfied until they have lived up to those standards. The strongest symptom of all is found in the fact that so many members of the Colored race resent any name or term which may be used to

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<sup>14</sup> According to both Archive and HathiTrust repositories, *Alexander’s Magazine* is in the public domain, which means that its contents can be reproduced freely without permission. A search in the Stanford University’s Copyright Renewal Database and First Copyright Renewals for Periodicals Database seems to confirm that the copyrights on *Alexander’s Magazine* had never been renewed.



designate them as a class apart from the rest of the community. Why should a Colored man resent the name of "Nigger?" True it is a term of derision. So was the term "Yankee" originally, but New Englanders did not resent that name. They accepted it; they have made it an honorable rather than a dishonorable name. The name "Methodist" was at one time a term of derision, but the people called Methodist did not resent the name and insist that they were not Methodists; they adopted the name and made it an honorable one. And I venture to assert that the Colored race will never achieve a position that is distinctly honorable until they follow the same plan and accept whatever name may be given them. What does a name signify anyway? I am not urging Colored men to adopt the name "Nigger," but I think it would be better to adopt it than to resent it. I would urge them at least to absolutely cease paying attention to names and devote their energies to the task of making whatever name is given them an honorable one. That can only be done by achieving good results, making themselves valuable members of society, adopting a standard of conduct and an ideal of life for the Colored race, and living up to that standard and that ideal, and seeing to it that it is a higher standard and a higher ideal, if possible, than the white race itself lives up to. By all means they should not be contented with comparing themselves with any other race whatsoever.

To live up to this advice would, I admit, require a high type of heroism. It was not an easy victory for the early Christians to make the title Christian an honorable one. It was at first a term of derision, and for the first few generations of Christians it must have been a heavy burden to bear the social ostracism and the general contempt which went with the name Christian. But if they had denied the name, or resented it in any way, Christianity would probably have died out, or have remained in a dishonorable state. But when the primitive Christians proudly accepted the name, and lived lives which in the course of time compelled respect and admiration, the name itself speedily lost its original significance and came to be a proud title. Can the Colored race in America set for itself a higher standard than that of making the name "Nigger" a proud title? Can it achieve that result? He who doubts it has a poorer opinion of the qualities and capacities of the race than he who believes it. (Carver 1905)

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