

What Carl Jung Said About Race Relations in America

by Michael Gellert

About a hundred years ago, the famous Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung visited the United States three times, lecturing, traveling widely, and acquainting himself with our people, including African and Native Americans. “America,” he concluded, “has probably the most complicated psychology of all nations.” This is as true today as it was then. With its own complexity, the race problem still plagues us, as events in Minneapolis currently illustrate. What can we learn from Jung that could help us today?

To begin, Jung would say that our first task would be to acknowledge race as a central problem of American life. Then *we* would *have* the problem, rather than *it* having *us*. The race problem poses a psychological and spiritual challenge to *all* Americans. But *how* do we address this in a way that is more than lip service on the one hand and more effective than rioting on the other?

Jung would argue that fundamental changes on an inner, psychological level must take place within *both* races before the gulf between them can be truly bridged. When he said that “every [American] Negro has a white complex and every [white] American a Negro complex,” he was pointing to features each race projects onto the other, thus becoming dissociated from those features in itself. The black complex is, figuratively speaking, the black man inside the white person’s psyche, as the white complex is the white man inside the black person’s psyche.

The black complex operates in the white American psyche as an instinctual force that is threatening and rooted in the mythic imagination with its irrational fantasies. “Black” is unconsciously associated with all things perceived as dark, dangerous, or demonic—our animal nature with its sexual drives, our fear of death, and our terror of, yet fascination with, evil. Joseph Conrad called all this the “Africa within.” When the

Africa within us is projected onto the African outside us, they are cast into the position of somebody or something “wholly other.” Then everything is permitted: slavery, segregation, and stereotypes that serve to keep this part of the human psyche at bay.

By contrast, the white complex in the African-American psyche is grounded in a very real history of oppression, suffering, and injustice, leading on the one hand to the black’s deep resentment and mistrust of white Americans, and on the other to a profound longing to be accepted by them. This complex thus operates as a judgmental, alienating force that compels African Americans to displace onto whites their self-worth and inner power.

On the one side then, a healthy relationship with blacks would require whites to become aware of their black complex and “own” it in a conscientious, responsible way. For this, they must come to terms with what makes the African American an enemy at the same time as a cultural hero: her tabooed but deeply desired connection to the instinctual side of the psyche (in a refined form, what African Americans rightly call “soul”). *By having unconsciously projected their black complex onto blacks, whites have in fact become what they most fear in blacks: barbaric and diabolically dark.* And yet, the more whites condemn and push this side of their psyche away, the more it is forced to live itself out through the African American. The latter thus becomes the white American’s unconscious connection to this side. The more it is scorned, the more it is forced to manifest in a shadowy, menacing form. The problems from which African Americans suffer and which invariably affect the rest of society—poverty, unemployment, drug abuse, violence and crime—are basically symptoms or ways through which the dissociated part of the white American psyche returns in order to be recognized (a dynamic that Freud called the “return of the repressed”). What is not let in through the front door sneaks around and breaks in through the back door. Unfortunately, in this way the white American’s worst fantasies of the black American become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and American society remains polarized and divided by racial animosity.

On the other side of the equation, there is the inner work African Americans must undertake. Any exploration of race relations in America must take into account the role of both parties. To the extent that blacks “buy into” or internally identify with the image whites project onto them (known in psychology as an introjection), they become marginalized. As statistics show, nearly all those murdered in black communities and all those murdering them are young black men. Too many African Americans are still marginalized, defeated in their outlook and ragefully exploiting and hurting themselves. *By not recognizing their own white complex, blacks unconsciously act out the role of the white exploiter, but upon themselves.* They believe they have no power to help themselves, that all the power rests with the white man. No doubt, inasmuch as money or ownership of resources is power, the facts show that much of the power in America does reside in white hands. But people with a sense of peoplehood are powerful, too, and as civil rights leaders have stressed, integrity and pride in oneself is the most important power one can have. Surely the inner city needs more in the way of education and opportunities than just promises and good will, but waiting for these to happen cannot be an excuse for the people who live there to waste their energies and lives away. Raising their awareness of their marginalizing white complex is the first and most critical step toward their empowerment.

The only real solution to America’s race problems, as Jung repeatedly emphasized in regard to social issues, is consciousness of the shadow, of the disowned, projected parts of the personality and of one’s own propensity toward evil. We must acknowledge that institutional racism is *still* rampant. Police departments must introduce in-depth training on the stereotypes some officers carry and project onto African Americans. Without awareness and examination of their black complex, white officers remain vulnerable to being seized by it in moments of danger and panic. How can we expect to change behavior without acknowledging the workings of the psyche from which it stems? A similar educative process of raising the awareness of young people and instilling

tolerance should be implemented nationwide and, while they are still impressionable, in elementary and middle school. How else can we influence their character development so that they don't grow up to be like the hateful, angry, fear-driven bigots who acted out in Charlottesville in 2017? Learning to live with awareness can surely be fostered by good education—education that has depth—but social programs enforced collectively or top-down by the government are not enough. The solution to America's race problems is a matter of the individual's efforts to raise his awareness, and of many such efforts by many individuals. In the end, a nation can only be as moral, enlightened, and harmonious as its individual citizens.

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