

## D. AUGUSTUS STRAKER

### FROM *The New South Investigated* (1888)

*Henry Grady's glowing account of the New South glossed over many unpleasant realities. In 1888 an African-American lawyer, author, and judge named D. Augustus Straker provided his own assessment of the New South.*

From *The New South Investigated* (Detroit: Ferguson Publishing Co., 1888), pp. 26–27, 92–93, 94, 96–97.

The South today has, amid all its troubles, political and otherwise, made great advancement in industry, education and commerce. Our land owners are now ready and willing to utilize their lands and not let them lie uncultivated. Our farmers no longer confine themselves to the growing of cotton only, but are engaged in the more varied industry of planting corn and rice. . . . Manufactories begin to dot the South in all of its principal cities and towns.

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Is it true that the progress of the South, which I have shown to have taken place, improved the social condition of the South? Is it true that the Negro of the South, which is known as largely the laboring class, and, therefore, the producing class, has improved in *his* social condition compared with the white class, which is known as largely the capital or non-producing class? Why is it, in plainer terms, that the Negro who was poor at the close the war when made free, is today yet poor when compared to the white man of the South? You may say that this is the result of the ignorance of the one and the knowledge of the other, but while I do not deny that ignorance and knowledge enter largely into the producing and non-producing quality of material advancement, it has not, and should not, have anything to do with the just relationship between capital and labor and the just wages paid as compensation for adequate labor.

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As I have said before, it is not only the political change in the administration which is daily causing thousands of colored farm hands, and even mechanics, to migrate from the South to the West, but it is also caused by unjust wages, wages which do not admit of bare living, such as 15 cents a day, and \$6 or \$8 per month. These low wages are carrying out a plan, said to have been suggested by Calhoun,<sup>1</sup> for the purpose of “keeping the Negro down.” And how is this done in the South? Not only by paying him lower wages and giving him poorer rations, but still further denying him the opportunity for further material advancement. A colored man in the South cannot purchase land with the facility of his white brother, not only because of his poor wages as compensation for his services, but because of the general indisposition to sell him land. Since the war, thousands of colored people who have commenced to purchase lands have been unable to do so and have lost what they have already paid, not only because some were defaulters in payment, but because more were the victims of the white man’s original design to defraud him by some clause in the mortgage or fee simple deed, which defeated his tenure just at the time when he thought most sure he was the absolute owner. . . .

<sup>1</sup> South Carolina statesman John C. Calhoun (1782–1850).

This system of discrimination between labor and capital, as seen in unjust wages and no protection, is also to be found among the few mechanics who perform operative labor in the South. It is not an unusual thing to see a white and black mechanic, who although doing the same work, yet receive different wages. . . . How then can the social condition of the South be other than a dividing and a divergent one between the races? And the question here arises, is the present social condition of the South one of true progress—materially or socially? I unhesitatingly answer, no! The South's progress, socially, is only apparent and shadowy; it is not substantial; it cannot be with a divided and unequal people in condition and opportunity.

The present social condition of the South, as found in its white and black population, arises not so much from the habit of keeping separate these two races on account of race or color, as by reason of the disparity in conditions and the hindrance to industrial pursuits set up by the same powerful whites against their weaker brethren—the blacks. You may say this is equally so with these two classes in the North, East, and West, and yet the social condition is not the same. The principle is not different, but the facts are, and only serve to prove the truth of the principle.

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It cannot be denied that the social condition of the South in which it finds itself so far behind the other portions of the country in industry, is owing

to the folly of keeping out from engaging in industrial pursuits the class of people largest in numbers in its midst. The folly of trades unions, or the spirit which denies colored persons admissions to the workshops in the South, is the chief cause of Southern depression in trade, and despite the progress it has made, is the reason it has not made greater progress. It is evident that if the South could receive into its midst a large amount of capital, and would then open its avenues of industry for the large quantum of labor it possesses, in the large number of colored people in their midst, it would spring into a powerful, rich and more prosperous portion of our country, with magic and alacrity, and would be the garden spot of the United States. . . .

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. While stressing the difference between producers and non-producers, how does Straker characterize capitalism in general?
2. In describing some of the hardships faced by African Americans in the South, how does Straker differ from Henry Grady?
3. According to Straker, what prevented poor whites from uniting with impoverished African Americans to promote common concerns?