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NEGRO MIGRATION DURING THE WAR

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CHAPTER II

Causes of the Migration

It seems particularly desirable in any study of the causes of the movement to get beneath the usual phraseology on the subject and find, if possible, the basis of the dissatisfaction, and the social, political and economic forces supporting it. It seems that most of the causes alleged were present in every section of the South, but frequently in a different order of importance. The testimony of the migrants themselves or of the leading white and colored men of the South was in general agreement. The chief points of disagreement were as to which causes were fundamental. The frequency with which the same causes were given by different groups is an evidence of their reality.

A most striking feature of the northern migration was its individualism. This factor after all, however, was economic. The motives prompting the thousands of negroes were not always the same, not even in the case of close neighbors. As a means of making intelligible these complicating factors it is necessary to watch the process as it affected the several migrants. The economic motive stands among the foremost reasons for the decision of the group to leave the South. There are several ways of arriving at a conclusion regarding the economic forces. These factors might, for example, be determined by the amount of unemployment or the extent of poverty in a community as registered by the prosperity. These facts are important, but may or may not account wholly for individual action. Except in a few localities of the South there was no actual misery and starvation. Nor is it evident that those who left would have perished from want had they remained. Discontent became more manifest as comparisons were made between the existing state of things at home and a much better state of things elsewhere. It is possible to note in the appeals of the

letters a suggestion of a desire simply to improve their living standards so long as there was an opportunity. In the case of some there is expressed a praiseworthy providence for their families; and in others may be found an index to the poverty and hopelessness of their home communities. In this type of migration the old order is strangely reversed. Large numbers of negroes have frequently moved around from State to State and even within the States of the South in search of more remunerative employment. A movement to the West or even about in the South could have proceeded from the same cause, as in the case of the migration to Arkansas and Oklahoma.

Among the immediate economic causes of the migration were the labor depression in the South in 1914 and 1915 and the large decrease in foreign immigration resulting from the World War. Then came the cotton boll weevil in the summers of 1915 and 1916, greatly damaging the cotton crop over considerable area, largely in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Florida, and threatening greatly to unsettle farming conditions in the year 1917.¹ There followed then the cotton price demoralization and the low price of this product during subsequent years. The unusual floods during the summer of 1915 over large sections in practically the same States further aggravated the situation. The negroes, moreover, were generally dissatisfied because of the continued low wages which obtained in the South in spite of the increasing cost of living. Finally, there was a decided decrease in foreign immigration. The result was a great demand in the North for the labor of the negro at wages such as he had never received.²

To understand further the situation in the South at the beginning of the migration and just prior to it, attention should be directed to the fact that the practice of mortgaging the cotton crop before it is produced made sudden reversals—an inevitable result of such misfortune as followed the boll weevil and the floods. Thousands of landlords were forced to dismiss their tenants and close the commissaries from which came the

¹ *New York Times*, September 5, 9, 28, 1916.

² *Ibid.*, October 18, 28; November 5, 7, 12, 15; December 4, 9, 1916.

daily rations. Some planters in Alabama and Mississippi advised their tenants to leave and even assisted them. The banks and merchants refused to extend credit when cotton was no longer to be had as a security. As a consequence, a great number of tenants were left without productive work, money or credit. A host of idle persons thrown suddenly on the labor market could have no other effect than to create an excess in the cities to which they flocked, make laborers easily replaceable, and consequently reduce wages. A southern paper in commenting on this situation declared "there is nothing for this excess population to do. These people must live on the workers, making the workers poorer . . . if there is a tap that will draw off the idle population, that will be a good thing for the cities at least."¹

The circumstances of unemployment which contributed so largely to the restless mood in some sections of the South was due primarily to a lack of sufficient capital to support labor during the lean seasons. This meant, of course, that the cotton pests and storms that played havoc with whole sections rendered helpless all classes of the population. The usual method of handling labor, especially on the cotton plantations, was for the planter to maintain his hands from the commissary during the fall and early winter in order that they might be convenient for the starting and cultivation of a new crop. But with their last year's crop lost, their credit gone and the prospects of a new crop very shadowy, there was left no other course but to dismiss the people whom they could not support.

For a long time southern farmers had been importuned to adopt a more diversified method of farming to offset the effects of unexpected misfortune in the cotton industry and to preserve the value of the soil. Following the ravages of the boll weevil, the idea gained wide application. The cotton acreage was cut down and other crops substituted. The cultivation of cotton requires about five times as many laborers as the cultivation of corn and the work is fairly continuous for a few employes throughout the year. Additional unemployment for negro ten-

¹ Work, *Report on Negro Migration from Alabama*.

ant farmers was an expected result of this diversification. The greatest immediate disadvantage to negro planters and small farmers resulting from the failure of the cotton crops was the lack of money and credit to sustain them while the corn and velvet beans were being grown. It was for like reasons impracticable to attempt to raise stock, for there was no means of making a beginning, as a certain amount of capital was prerequisite.

Despite the fact that food prices began to rise with the war, wages advanced very slowly. In 1915, wages of farm laborers in the South averaged around 75 cents a day. In the towns the principal opportunities for employment were in the oil mills, lumber mills, cotton compresses, railroad shops and domestic service. In the mills and shops the average of wages ranged from \$1 to \$1.50 a day. The wages of such skilled laborers as carpenters and bricklayers ranged from \$2 to \$3.50 a day. In domestic service women received from \$1.50 to \$3 per week and board. Men in domestic service received on an average of \$5 a week.¹

In spite of these conditions in the South it might appear strange that not until fifty years after the privilege was granted negroes to go where they pleased did they begin to make a sudden rush for the northern States. Stranger still does it seem that, despite the fairly general agreement among southern negroes that the North affords greater personal liberty, is less prejudiced to individuals because of the color of their skins, grants to negroes something nearer to open handed justice, participation in the government, wider privileges and freer associations, there should be in 1910 scarcely more than one-tenth of the negro population where these reputed advantages are. The North has been looked upon as the "Promised Land," the "Ark of Safety," the "House of Refuge" for all these years. A common reason recently advanced by the majority of southern negroes for the abandonment of their homes was the desire to escape from the oppressive social system of their section. Why have they not escaped before? The answer lies in the very hard

¹ Work and Johnson, *Report on the Migration during the World War*.

fact that, though the North afforded larger privileges, it would not support negroes. It was the operation of an inexorable economic law, confused with a multitude of social factors, that pushed them back to the soil of the South despite their manifest desire to leave it.

None of the causes was more effective than that of the opportunity to earn a better living. Wages offered in the North were double and treble those received in the South. Women who received \$2.50 a week in domestic service could earn from \$2.10 to \$2.50 a day and men receiving \$1.10 and \$1.25 a day could earn from \$2.50 to \$3.75 a day in the various industries in the North.¹ An intensive study of the migration to Pitts-

¹ Attractive advertisements appeared in negro newspapers with wide circulation in the South. These are from the *Chicago Defender*.

"Wanted—10 molders. Must be experienced. \$4.50 to \$5.50 per day. Write B. F. R. *Defender* Office."

"Wanted—25 girls for dishwashing. Salary \$7 a week and board. John R. Thompson, Restaurant, 314 South State Street. Call between 7 and 8 a.m. Ask for Mr. Brown."

"Wanted—25 young men as bus boys and porters. Salary \$8 per week and board. John R. Thompson, Restaurant, 314 South State Street. Call between 7 and 8 a.m. Ask for Mr. Brown."

"Molders wanted. Good pay, good working conditions. Firms supply cottages for married men. Apply T. L. Jefferson, 3439 State Street."

"Ten families and 50 men wanted at once for permanent work in the Connecticut tobacco fields. Good wages. Inquire National League on Urban Conditions among Negroes, 2303 Seventh Avenue, New York City, New York."

"Molders wanted. A large manufacturing concern, ninety miles from Chicago, is in need of experienced molders. Wages from \$3 to \$5.50. Extra for overtime. Transportation from Chicago only. Apply Chicago League on Urban Conditions among Negroes. T. Arnold Hill, Executive Secretary, 3719 State Street, Chicago."

"Laborers wanted for foundry, warehouse and yard work. Excellent opportunity to learn trades, paying good money. Start \$2.50—\$2.75 per day. Extra for overtime. Transportation advanced from Chicago only. Apply Chicago League on Urban Conditions among Negroes, 3719 South State Street, Chicago."

"Experienced machinists, foundrymen, pattern makers wanted, for permanent work in Massachusetts. Apply National League on Urban Conditions among Negroes, 2303 7th Ave., New York City."

"3,000 laborers to work on railroad. Factory hires all race help. More positions open than men for them."

"Men wanted at once. Good steady employment for colored. Thirty and 39½ cents per hour. Weekly payments. Good warm sanitary quarters free. Best commissary privileges. Towns of Newark and Jersey City. Fifteen minutes by car line offer cheap and suitable homes for men with families. For out of town parties of ten or more cheap transportation will be arranged. Only reliable men who stay on their job are wanted. Apply

burgh, made by Mr. Abraham Epstein, gives an idea of the difference in wages paid in the North and the South. His findings may be quoted: "The great mass of workers get higher wages here than in the places from which they come. Fifty-six per cent received less than two dollars a day in the South, while only five per cent received such wages in Pittsburgh." Sixty-two per cent received between \$2 and \$3 per day in Pittsburgh as compared with 25 per cent in the South, and 28 per cent received between \$3 and \$3.60 in this city as compared with four per cent in the South.

The inability to educate their children properly because of the inadequacy of school facilities was another cause which has been universally given for leaving the South.¹ The basis for this frequently voiced complaint is well set forth in the study of *Negro Education* by Dr. Thomas Jesse Jones.²

or write Butterworth Judson Corporation, Box 273, Newark, New Jersey, or Daniel T. Brantley, 315 West 119th Street, New York City."

"\$3.60 per day can be made in a steel foundry in Minnesota, by strong, healthy, steady men. Open only to men living in Chicago. Apply in person. Chicago League on Urban Conditions among Negroes, 3719 South State Street, Chicago, Illinois."

¹ An investigator in Mississippi reports the following:

The school population is 60 per cent colored. There are seven white and two colored schools. The average salaries paid to white assistant teachers is \$75 per month. The average salaries paid to colored assistant teachers is \$32.50 per month. The average number of pupils taught by white is 30 and the average number taught by colored is 100.

In the county there are no agricultural high schools or in fact high schools of any kind. The whites in the same county have an agricultural high school of "magnificent proportions" and "excellent facilities," a literary high school and about ten consolidated schools.

Negroes complain that the authorities are building white schools in communities where the negro population is five times as great. When they first sought to establish these consolidated schools, there was a provision that every one must pay taxes to support them. Negroes who were required to pay large taxes refused because they were denied the benefits of the schools. A law was passed with the provision that the majority of qualified electors in a county supervisor's district might secure one of these schools on petition to the Board of Supervisors and with the understanding that they would pay taxes. But negroes are not qualified electors and consequently have no schools.

In Liberty Grove the white school goes to the twelfth grade, with courses also in music. Automobiles bring the children to school and carry them back. The negro school in the same community has only one teacher getting \$25 per month and teaching over 200 children. There are two large negro denominational schools, Jackson College and Campbell College which serve to supplement the public schools provided by the city.

² Jones, *Negro Education*, vol. II, pp. 14, 15, Bulletin, 1916, No. 30 of the United States Bureau of Education.

The inadequacy of the elementary school system for colored children is indicated both by the comparisons of public appropriations already given and by the fact that the attendance in both public and private schools is only 58.1 per cent of the children six to fourteen years of age. The average length of the public school term is less than five months in practically all of the southern States. Most of the school buildings, especially those in the rural districts, are in wretched condition. There is little supervision and little effort to improve the schools or adapt their efforts to the needs of the community. The reports of the State Departments of Georgia and Alabama indicate that 70 per cent of the colored teachers have third grade or temporary certificates, representing a preparation less than that usually given in the first eight elementary grades. Investigations made by supervisors of colored schools in other States indicate that the percentage of poorly prepared colored teachers is almost as high in the other southern States.

The supervisor of white elementary rural schools in one of the States recently wrote concerning negro schools: "I never visit one of these (negro) schools without feeling that we are wasting a large part of this money and are neglecting a great opportunity. The negro schoolhouses are miserable beyond all description. They are usually without comfort, equipment, proper lighting or sanitation. Nearly all of the negroes of school age in the district are crowded into these miserable structures during the short term which the school runs. Most of the teachers are absolutely untrained and have been given certificates by the county board, not because they have passed the examination, but because it is necessary to have some kind of negro teacher. Among the negro rural schools which I have visited, I have found only one in which the highest class knew the multiplication table."

The treatment which the negroes received at the hands of the courts and the guardians of the peace constituted another cause of the migration. Negroes largely distrust the courts and have to depend on the influence of their aristocratic white friends. When a white man assaults a negro he is not punished. When a white man kills a negro he is usually freed without extended legal proceedings, but the rule as laid down by the southern judge is usually that when a negro kills a white man, whether or not in self-defense, the negro must die. Negro witnesses count for nothing except when testifying against members of their own race. The testimony of a white man is conclusive in every instance. In no State of the South can a negro woman get a verdict for seduction, nor in most cases enter a suit against a white man; nor, where a white man is concerned, is the law of consent made to apply to a negro girl.

It will be said, however, that such drastic action is not general in the South; but throughout the Black Belt the negroes suffer from arrests and impositions for petty offenses which make their lives sometimes miserable. The large number of negroes owning automobiles is a source of many conflicts. Many collisions, possibly avoidable, have resulted in wresting from the negroes concerned excessive damages which go to increase the returns of the courts. For example, the chauffeur of one of the most influential negroes in Mississippi collided with a white man's car. Although there was sufficient evidence to exonerate the chauffeur concerned, the owner of the vehicle was forced to pay damages and sell his car.¹

In the Birmingham district of Alabama a striking discrimination is made in the arrests for failure to pay the street tax. Mr. Henry L. Badham, President of the Bessemer Coal, Iron and Land Company, said in commenting on the causes of the migration:

I do not blame the negroes for going away from Birmingham. The treatment that these unfortunate negroes are receiving from the police is enough to make them desire to depart. The newspapers have printed articles about the departure of the laborers from Birmingham. On one page there is a story to the effect that something should be done to prevent the exodus of the negroes to other cities. And then on the same page there appears a little paragraph stating that negroes were arrested for failure to pay \$2.50 street tax. The injustice of arresting these negroes for the inability to have \$2.50 ready to turn over into the coffers of the city is obvious. While they have been taken into custody, despite their protests that they merely have not a sufficient amount of money with which to meet the demand, you do not see that white men are arrested for the failure to pay the tax. There is no gainsaying the fact that there are thousands of men walking the streets who have not paid a similar sum into the treasury of the city. The negroes ought to get a square deal. When he is without funds, you can not blame him for that. The city police ought to be more reliable, or at least show no favoritism.²

The fee system in the courts of the South is one of the most effective causes of the migration. The employers of labor fought this system for eight years and finally got it abolished in Jefferson county, Alabama. Under this system the sheriff

¹ Work and Johnson, *Report on the Migration during the World War*.

² *Montgomery Advertiser*.

received a fee for feeding all prisoners. The greater the number of prisoners, the greater would be the income for the sheriff's office. As a result, it became customary in Jefferson county, Alabama, to arrest negroes in large numbers. Deputy sheriffs would go out to mining camps where there were large numbers of laborers and bring back fifty or more negroes at a time. This condition became unbearable both to the employer and to the employe. Calling attention to the evil of this fee system, Dr. W. H. Oates, State Prison Inspector, said in his annual report for 1914:¹

The vile, pernicious, pervading fee system beggars description and my vocabulary is inadequate to describe its deleterious and baneful effects. It increases in the management of our jails greed for the almighty dollar. Prisoners are arrested because of the dollar and, shame to say, are frequently kept in captivity for months in steel cages for no other reason than the almighty dollar.

During the fiscal year ending September 30, 1917, Jefferson county had 6,000 prisoners as follows:

In jail at the beginning of the year.....	328
Incarcerated during the year:	
White men	1,289
Negro men	3,636
White women	118
Negro women	969
Total	6,340

The fee bill, according to the sheriff's annual report of this department was \$37,688.90. As the law provided that for each prisoner the sheriff shall receive 30 cents a day for feeding, and as a matter of fact the sheriff fed them for 10 cents a day, it is clear that he made a net profit of \$25,125.94 during one fiscal year or at the same rate for his term of four years, \$100,503.76.²

Another frequent complaint was directed against the accommodations for travel. It generally happens that the cars are crowded because the amount of space allotted is insufficient, and

¹ Annual Report of the Prison Inspector of Alabama, 1914.

² Report of the Sheriff of Jefferson County, Alabama, 1917.

negroes as a class are denied accommodation in sleeping and dining cars. Usually there is but one toilet for both sexes and the waiting rooms at stations are cut off, unclean and insanitary. Then there are numerous petty offenses, which in themselves appear trifling, but which are spoken of as being on the whole considerably annoying. White men are permitted to come into the negroes' part of the coach and entertain the conductor, newsboy and flagman, all of whom usually make their headquarters there. The drunkards, the insane and other undesirables are forced into this compartment among negro women who have to listen to oaths and vulgar utterances. In stopping at some points, the trains halt the negro car in muddy and abominably disagreeable places; the rudeness and incivility of the public servants are ever apparent, and at the stations the negroes must wait at a separate window until every white passenger has purchased a ticket before he is waited on, although he may be delayed long enough to miss the train.

Both whites and negroes in mentioning the reasons for the movement generally give lynching as one of the most important causes and state that the fear of the mob has greatly accelerated the exodus. Negroes in Florida gave as their reason for going north the horrible lynchings in Tennessee. The white press in Georgia maintained that lynchings were driving the negroes in large numbers from that State. A careful study of the movement, however, shows that bad treatment by representatives of the law caused almost as many negroes to leave the South as lynchings, for, whereas lynchings were more or less sporadic, persecutions and mistreatment by representatives of the law were trials which all negroes had continually to bear and from which they were anxious to escape.¹

Many of these causes then have their origin on the one hand in the attitude which the South assumes toward the negro as expressed in law and public opinion, and on the other hand in the feeling of the negro toward the South because of the treatment given him. A negro educator of Mississippi sought to explain the situation, saying:

¹ Work and Johnson, *Report on the Migration during the World War*.

Many white men of high intellectual ability and keen discernment have mistaken the negroes' silence for contentment, his facial expression for satisfaction at prevailing conditions, and his songs and jovial air for happiness.¹ But this is not always so. These are his methods of bearing trouble and keeping his soul sweet under seeming wrongs. In the absence of a spokesman or means of communication with the whites over imagined grievances, he has brightened his countenance, smiled and sung to ease his mind. In the midst of it all he is unable to harmonize with the practices of daily life the teachings of the Bible which the white Christian placed in his hands. He finds it difficult to harmonize the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, and his faith is put to the test in the *Providence* which enslaved his ancestors, corrupted his blood and placed upon him stigmas more damaging than to be a leper or convict by making his color a badge of infamy and his preordained social position at the bottom of human society. So firmly has his status been fixed by this *Providence* that neither moral worth, fidelity to trust, love of home, loyalty to country, or faith in God can raise him to human recognition.

When he remembers that he has been the beast of burden of southern civilization and the foundation of its luxuriant ease, when he rehearses to his children that he was the South's sole dependence when his master was away repelling hostile armies, and how he worked by day and guarded his unprotected mistress and her children at night, or accompanied his master to the swamps of Virginia and the Carolinas and bound up his wounds or brought his maimed or dead body home on his shoulders, these children can not understand the attitude of the South toward them. They do not understand why they have not been educated to efficiency and employed to the best interest of the South. They do not understand why they have not been given better living conditions, a more equitable division of funds appropriated for the education of the youth, nor provisions made for their higher or professional training, or why so much prejudice is engendered in the practice of these professions among their own people. They do not understand why they have been made to toil at starvation wages and to pay heavy fines and suffer long prison sentences for stealing food and clothing. They do not understand why no estimate is placed upon negro virtue and the full rights of citizenship are denied to negroes of education, character and worth. If some mysterious *Providence* has ordained that they support themselves and employers by farming, they do not understand why they are deprived of agricultural schools. They do not see why mere prejudice would prevent them from obtaining a square deal when contending for the

¹ Mr. Charles S. Johnson reports the following from Mississippi:

"The police of most of the cities are rough and indiscriminate in their treatment of negroes. At the depot during the summer, on several occasions, negro porters were severely beaten by policemen for trivial reasons. This, it was said, started a stream of young men that cleaned the town of porters.

"Fee constables made their living from arresting negroes, indiscriminately, on trivial charges. A white man, to whom a prominent negro physician had gone for advice on a case concerning his arrest on a charge of having no lights on his automobile, said, 'If I were a negro, I would rather appear before a Russian court than come before a court here for trial.'"

possessions of life, liberty and property. They do not understand why they are not protected from petty peace officers in search of fees and from mobs while in the hands of officers of the law. Finally, they do not understand why there is so little genuine sympathy and brotherhood between them and the only people they know—the people whose language and customs they use, under whose laws they live, whose Bible they read, whose God they serve. These thoughts possessed the negroes' mind when, twelve months ago, the boll weevil and rains destroyed the crops in the South and the European war was calling foreigners from field and factory in the North.¹

One should bear in mind that the two generations of negroes living in the South are affected differently by the measures of control of the whites, and in many cases respond differently to treatment received. The older generation of whites and blacks avoided much friction by a sort of mutual understanding. The children of colored and white parents come less frequently into friendly contact and find it difficult to live together on the terms accepted by their fathers. Negro parents appreciate this situation but, although admitting that they can tolerate the position to which they are assigned, they do not welcome such an arrangement for their children. For this reason they are not reluctant to send their sons away from home. Should the children remain there, they live in a state of anxiety for their safety. They would not have them grow up as they, encompassed by restraints, and the young men themselves appear to entertain toward the prevailing system a more aggressive hostility.

A woman of color in Greenville, Mississippi, for example, had a son in a northern State and was afraid to invite him home to pay a visit because, as she stated, "for him to accept the same abuses to which we, his parents, are accustomed, would make him much less than the man we would have him be." Another negro, a physician, the "Nestor" of his profession, having practiced in his State over thirty-five years, said:

Sir, I can't expect my son to accept the treatment under which I have been brought up. My length of residence here and the number of friends whom I know of the older and more aristocratic type of whites will protect

¹ Work and Johnson, *Report on the Migration during the World War*.

me, but as for him, there is no friendship. Now, as for me, there is no reason why I should leave. I am making as much money as I could anywhere else and all of the white people respect me. But I am just one out of a thousand. The younger men have neither my contact nor influence.

A lawyer of remarkable talent formerly of Mississippi, now living with his children in Chicago, who had felt keenly this humiliation and recognized it as one of the motives behind his change of residence, thus stated the situation:

One peculiar phase of the white southern prejudice is that no matter how well liked or popular a colored man be in any community, his son does not share that popularity unless he enters a field of endeavor distinctly lower in the scale than that occupied by his parent. My experience goes both ways on this subject. My stepfather was a dearly beloved colored man of the old school, but when he sent me off to Oberlin College I returned to find that the community in which I had been beloved as a boy in attendance at the rude country school looked at me askance. It took twenty years to overcome the handicap of attempting to occupy a higher sphere than that to which the community thought it right to assign me. My experiences were repeated by my son. He was a well liked boy by the best people in a city of about twenty-five thousand, because he was my son and was polite and agreeable. When he went to a nearby Mississippi college and worked in his summer vacations in a local industrial plant, they still thought well of him, but when it was learned that he was being graduated at Oberlin College, and his picture appeared in a college year book, among others, my intimate white friends wanted to know the necessity for so much education and, with a shrug of the shoulder, they let all mention of him drop, as if he had offended the most sacred laws of the community. This spirit appeared so marked that I did not have him come back to visit his mother and me during the summer vacation. I have seen the same spirit in many instances. No man can explain why it is, but it is so.¹

¹ Work and Johnson, *Report on the Migration during the World War*.