Jim Crow and the Great Migration

The silent protest parade in New York City against the East St. Louis riots, 1917. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

In September 1895, Booker T. Washington, the head of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, stepped to the podium at the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition and implored white employers to “cast down your bucket where you are” and hire African Americans who had proven their loyalty even throughout the South’s darkest hours. In return, Washington declared, southerners would be able to enjoy the fruits of a docile work force that would not agitate for full civil rights. Instead, blacks would be “In all things that are purely social . . . as separate as the fingers.”

Washington called for an accommodation to southern practices of racial segregation in the hope that blacks would be allowed a measure of economic freedom and then, eventually, social and political equality. For other prominent blacks, like W. E. B. Du Bois who had just received his PhD from Harvard, this was an unacceptable strategy since the only way they felt that blacks would be able to improve their social standing would be to assimilate and demand full citizenship rights immediately.

Regardless of which strategy one selected, it was clear that the stakes were extremely high. In the thirty years since the Civil War ended African

Americans had experienced startling changes to their life opportunities. Emancipation was celebrated, of course, but that was followed by an intense debate about the terms of black freedom: who could buy or sell property, get married, own firearms, vote, set the terms of employment, receive an education, travel freely, etc. Just as quickly as real opportunities seemed to appear with the arrival of Reconstruction, when black men secured unprecedented political rights in the South, they were gone when northern armies left in 1877 and the era of Redemption began. These were the years when white Southerners returned to political and economic power, vowing to "redeem" themselves and the South they felt had been lost. Part of the logic of Redemption revolved around controlling black bodies and black social, economic, and political opportunities. Much of this control took the form of so-called Jim Crow laws—a wide-ranging set of local and state statutes that, collectively, declared that the races must be segregated.

In 1896, the year after Washington's Atlanta Cotton Exposition speech, the Supreme Court declared in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that racial segregation was constitutional. It would take fifty-eight years for that decision to be reversed (in *Brown v. Board of Education*). In the meantime, African Americans had to negotiate the terms of their existence through political agitation, group organizing, cultural celebration, and small acts of resistance. Much of this negotiation can be seen in the history of the Great Migration, that period when blacks began to move, generally speaking, from the rural South to the urban North. In the process, African Americans changed the terms upon which they exercised their claims to citizenship and rights as citizens.

There are at least two factual aspects of the Great Migration that are important to know from the start: 1) the black migration generally occurred between 1905 and 1930 although it has no concrete beginning or end and 2) from the standpoint of sheer numbers, the Great Migration was dwarfed by a second migration in the 1940s and early 1950s, when blacks became a majority urban population for the first time in history. Despite these caveats, the Great Migration remains important in part because it marked a

fundamental shift in African American consciousness. As such, the Great Migration needs to be understood as a deeply political act.

Migration was political in that it often reflected African American refusal to abide by southern social practices any longer. Opportunities for southern blacks to vote or hold office essentially disappeared with the rise of Redemption, job instability only increased in the early twentieth century, the quality of housing and education remained poor at best, and there remained the ever-looming threat of lynch law if a black person failed to abide by local social conventions. Lacking even the most basic ability to protect their own or their children's bodies, blacks simply left.

The scale and pace of black departure—"exodus" is probably a more fitting term—was magnified by several overlapping factors. It was increasingly clear, for example, that sharecropping, a form of agricultural employment that effectively guaranteed permanent indebtedness, was a dead end. Making life even worse on the farms was the sudden appearance of the boll weevil, a scourge that swept across the Southeast and devastated the cotton economy. At the same time that southern agricultural jobs disappeared there were new opportunities in northern factories since the pool of immigrant labor dried up as Europe began its march to war. News of incredible opportunities in the North—better housing, the right to vote, high-paying jobs—became a frequent topic of conversation in black southern homes as friends and family returned for visits or wrote letters describing their good fortune. Further heightening the sense of possibilities in the North as well as offering reminders of the risks of staying in the South, the *Chicago Defender*, the major black newspaper of the day and one that could boast a huge southern circulation, constantly ran stories about northern job opportunities and abiding southern racial violence. Finally, as black migration steadily increased, social and political activists established betterment organizations like the National Urban League (1910) with the goal of improving the quality of life for so many black migrants inexperienced with the challenges of city life.

The effect on northern cities was dramatic. Just taking a look at the years between 1910 and 1920 one can see the black population increase by 66 percent in New York, almost 150 percent in Chicago, and over 600 percent in Detroit. These were the years when Harlem and the Southside became known, respectively, as New York's and Chicago's black enclaves.

Even though the majority of southern migrants ended up in northern cities, it would be a mistake to believe that their migration was direct or permanent. Most migration happened in fits and starts. Some might leave the southern farm and settle in a nearby southern city. Others might leave the field or the southern town and find themselves in Kentucky coalfields for months at a time or longer before returning home. Still others would accept the invitation of labor agents who were paid by northern industrialists to recruit blacks to northern factories. But while a labor agent could make the trip affordable and quick it was far from certain that the job in the North was worth having. Indeed, many blacks returned South permanently, their migration dreams overwhelmed by the reality of their circumstances in the North.

Despite the fact that black migrants enjoyed significantly greater freedom in the North, life for the area's new residents was far from easy. In many instances, blacks were hired as scab labor, employed either to break a local union or to force striking whites back to work. As the migrant populations soared there was an enormous stress on available housing since de facto segregation determined who lived where. Brownstone apartment buildings originally designed for five families, for example, would be carved up to hold five or six times as many people, significantly compromising sanitation and public health. Earlier black settlers, even those who preceded new arrivals by only a few years, resented the migrants and the problems that seemed to accompany them as job, housing, and political anxieties only increased with each new arrival.

Even though older black residents' frustration with the migrants' "noisy" and "uncouth" behavior was a familiar refrain focused upon preserving the status

quo, every African American was concerned about the era's rapidly escalating racial violence. For example, after being wiped out at the national level during Reconstruction, the Ku Klux Klan reappeared and its numbers surged. Part of this new-found popularity was directly related to the 1915 release of D.W. Griffith's movie, *The Birth of a Nation*. This film, based on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*, claimed to be a historical depiction of racial politics during Reconstruction. It was entirely sympathetic to southern sensibilities about the war of "northern aggression," portrayed blacks as buffoons, mammies, or sexually insatiable rapists, and celebrated the commitment of the Klan to restoring southern pride. President Woodrow Wilson admired the film in a special White House screening even as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), established in 1909, decried it as "three miles of filth."

Not directly related to the film or the Klan were spasms of violence in cities across the country. Most notorious were the race riots in East St. Louis in 1917 and those in Chicago in 1919. In East St. Louis, striking white laborers assaulted black scab workers at area aluminum factories. Police stood by and let the black workers be attacked with fists, clubs, and knives. Nearly fifty people died in the violence but there were an unknown number of others who perished since their bodies were thrown into ditches or the Mississippi River and never recovered. Thousands of black families were left homeless. The East St. Louis massacre did not go unnoticed. Three weeks after the riots, the NAACP organized a silent march down New York's Fifth Avenue. Ten thousand men, women, and children marched to the beat of muffled drums from Harlem to the heart of Manhattan carrying banners like "Mr. President, why not make America safe for Democracy?" or "Mother, do lynchers go to heaven?"

Two years later, black neighborhoods would come under attack in Chicago. There, the violence began when a black teenager was stoned to death by whites while he was swimming in Lake Michigan. Within hours, swarms of armed white ethnics began to attack blacks who had dared to move into their

neighborhoods. Over the next few days the violence spread into majority black enclaves with calm restored only when the governor called in the Illinois National Guard. In the end, almost forty people died and well over 5,000 were injured. Over a thousand African Americans lost their homes in the five days of violence. Even though the underlying causes of Chicago's outburst were different than East St. Louis's (housing shortages in Chicago, job scarcity in East St. Louis), the fact remained that racial violence became familiar to the country's cities in this era. More than twenty-five cities experienced race riots in the summer of 1919 alone.

In addition to the increased stress on housing and the labor market, the changing demographics of the black population also meant that new ways of understanding "blackness" were evolving. In addition to the material possessions they carried with them, migrating African Americans brought their culture as well. New combinations of religious practice, music, folklore, and the arts emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1925, Alain Locke, Howard University professor of philosophy, took note of the changing cultural discourse and applauded the cultural renaissance that he saw flourishing in the cities. The publication of his book *The New Negro* captured the energy generated by poets like Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, writers like Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer, and artists like Aaron Douglas and Augusta Savage. These figures are just a tiny sampling of the vibrant cultural scene one could find in Harlem, most famously, but that was also thriving in Washington, DC, Kansas City, Chicago, and other cities that became home to entirely new combinations of black communities.

The New Negro mentality was about more than the arts, however. Over the course of the first decades of the twentieth century, Booker T. Washington's politics of accommodation were increasingly challenged by the more assertive politics most famously represented by the NAACP (Du Bois was a founding officer), which sought legal remedies to blacks' continuing second-class status. Adding his voice to this mix was Marcus Garvey, founder and leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Born in Jamaica and

educated in England, Garvey felt that Harlem was the capital of the black world and that he needed to base his black nationalist organization there in order to tap into that community's energy. With Garvey as its charismatic leader, the UNIA advocated a self-help economic philosophy and sought a return to Africa in order to establish a "black man's empire." Garvey's visions appealed most clearly to the legions of blacks who had migrated to the northern cities but found the transition difficult. Membership in the UNIA auxiliaries (uniformed marching bands, the Black Star Nurses, among others) gave its members purpose and fashioned a sense of belonging that may have been otherwise difficult for recently arrived blacks to secure. Very quickly, Garvey's UNIA became the largest organized grassroots movement in African American history. With Garvey's arrest in 1925 on trumped up charges of mail fraud and then his deportation in 1927 much of the energy behind the UNIA faded. Despite this, the need for black sojourners to feel as if they belonged in their new settings remained.

With the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent collapse of the job market, the pace of northern migration slowed. And even though many of the social and political challenges that led to the black exodus from the South remained in place, there was no doubt that a new way of seeing the present world and imagining its future had emerged. The black radical politics of the 1930s, the impressive scope of the Second Great Migration (beginning in the 1940s), and the legal triumphs of the civil rights era all owed a debt to the changing political, social, and cultural sensibilities that grew out of the Great Migration.

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