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The Benefits of the Great Migration

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"Negroes, Leave the South!" commanded a 1920 editorial in *The Messenger*, that foundational magazine of the Harlem Renaissance, founded three years prior by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph. "Go North, East, and West—anywhere—to get out of that hell hole." There were better schools. There was better housing. There was the vote. "All is not rosy here, by any means," the magazine admitted, "but it is Paradise" compared with its Southern counterpart. "Besides, you make it better for those you leave behind. Labor becomes scarce, so that the Bourbons of Dixie are compelled to pay your brothers back home more wages." Whatever hardships migrants endured, they would end up benefitting everyone, North and South. "Sell out your stuff quietly, saying nothing to the Negro lackeys, and leave! Come into the land of at least incipient civilization!"[1]

The "land of at least incipient civilization" was, as the name suggests, mostly beneficial to the black community, but with clear limits on those benefits. The migration of black Southerners to Northern urban hubs helped crystallize race as a national issue rather than a regional one at a time when Jim Crow, voting restrictions, and the convict lease system dominated the South. The residential segregation that developed in Northern urban areas helped create a more stable black middle class than its forebear, which sold its products and services to a largely white clientele and thus was victim to the caprice of bigotry. That stable, urban middle class then allowed for the creation of the first black literary magazines in the late Gilded Age, which eventually gave way to the full flowering of black culture during the Harlem Renaissance. That, in turn, set the precedent for a viable black presence in both academia and culture in the future. While life in the urban North was certainly difficult, life in the rural South had proven far more deadly, the racism far more systemic and violent. Such was to be expected from a "hell hole."

Several states in that hell hole adopted new constitutions that called for literacy tests, property qualifications, poll taxes, or other measures to keep the black population from voting. States also began passing Jim Crow laws, mandating segregation in almost all public facilities. Most began leasing convicts to private contractors such as coal-mining firms, railroads, and planters. The state got paid, and the companies got cheap labor they could treat like slaves. Those pseudo-slaves were ill-fed, ill-clothed, and often worked to death. And death could also come outside of the legal system, as the region averaged more than 180 lynchings annually in the 1890s.

Conditions were so bad in the South that many decided to leave. In the 19th century, most black Southerners were far more likely to emigrate to Africa, to the American West, or to urban hubs within the South than they were to Northern cities. And it was a slow move at first. In the 1910s, 90% of black Americans still lived in the South. The larger migration to Northern urban industrial hubs didn't really begin until the middle of the 1910s. Still, early migration was significant. Hundreds of Southerners chose to migrate to Liberia. Between 1865 and 1880, roughly 40,000 moved to Kansas. Even more would move to Oklahoma. By 1900, African Americans possessed 1.5 million acres in Oklahoma worth \$11 million.[2] Others moved to California, New Mexico, Colorado, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and elsewhere on the Great Plains.

Of course, not everyone was happy about this. In 1879, Frederick Douglass insisted that the South was the place for black Americans to be. "Not only is the South the best locality for the Negro on the ground of his political powers and possibilities, but it is best for him as a field of labor. He is there, as he is nowhere else, an absolute necessity." [3] And so some of that early migration actually happened within the South itself, as rural black farmers moved to urban centers to find jobs. Atlanta, Richmond, and Nashville grew large and significant black neighborhoods. All, however, were leaving to escape poverty, bigotry, or violence.

From 1890 to 1910, about 200,000 African Americans left the South for the North and West. Between 1910 and 1940, 1.75 million black people left the South, doubling the black population outside of the region. There, they generally worked outside of industry, as janitors, elevator operators, and house servants. There weren't Jim Crow laws in the North, but Northern industrialists generally refused to hire black workers, preferring immigrants from Eastern Europe. It was a vestige of that "incipient civilization," factory owners worrying that hiring black employees would associate their products with blackness and thus alienate white customers.[4] Black workers, then, were only brought in as scabs during strikes, making them even less

popular in a racist North. The first major example of this happened in 1904, when 28,000 meatpacking workers went on strike, and black scabs took their place.[5]

Just by migrating north, then, black Southerners exposed the burgeoning racism that existed in urban areas in the early 20th century. It was a phenomenon that could only damage the black middle class that already lived in the region. In 1870, for example, a third of Northern black workers were skilled. Black service businesses like barbershops and restaurants catered to a largely white clientele. Middle-class black magazines sprung up like *The Colored American* and *The Voice of the Negro* to rival the growing white magazine industry. By 1910, however, only a tenth of Northern black workers were skilled. Black barbershops began to decline, as did the number of black waiters. The existing black middle class was faltering because of growing Northern racism. Whites no longer wanted black barbers cutting their hair, or cooks and waiters preparing their food. It was this impetus, along with that of a rising immigrant population, that helped promote urban Northern segregation, as whites colluded to keep black residents (and foreign immigrants) out of their neighborhoods.

That residential segregation, however, led to the creation of strong black neighborhoods that would allow a new black middle class to rise from the ash of the one left decimated by white racism at the onset of the Great Migration. Harlem, for example, was a white neighborhood in upper Manhattan that had declined by the late 1800s. But when New York officials began building the city's subway, it planned on creating a stop location in Harlem, thereby connecting it with the downtown area. Speculators responded by building again. They overbuilt, however, and the subway took much longer to reach Harlem than originally proposed, so white property owners began renting to black residents who were migrating to the city in droves.

Harlem's white residents were opposed to what they saw as a black takeover, but realizing they could make money selling their homes, they began a process of white flight instead of actively fighting black residency. Thousands of African Americans from other parts of New York and from the South then flooded the neighborhood. Churches led the way in an "On to Harlem" movement. St. Philips Protestant Episcopal Church even bought apartment houses and rented them out to needy residents. By 1920, 75,000 black people lived in Harlem, and it became the "Negro Capital of the World." [6]

Most black enclaves couldn't lay claim to such a title, but Detroit's Paradise Valley, Pittsburgh's Hill District, and hundreds of other neighborhoods did do similar work, creating the need for the sorts of services that all such neighborhoods required. Churches, fraternal societies, and political organizations sprung up, and a new class of ministers and businesspeople became the core of urban society. Real estate agencies, funeral homes, doctors' offices, newspapers, groceries, and restaurants soon opened for business, all catering to an almost exclusively black customer base. This new business class realized that though black customers had less wealth than their white counterparts, they had loyalty to products and businesses that wasn't conditioned by racial whims. The Great Migration swelled the customer base to sufficient numbers to make that business plan successful.

No one took advantage of the phenomenon better than Madame C. J. Walker. Born Sarah Breedlove in 1867 on a northeast Louisiana cotton plantation, she married at age 14 and was a widowed single mother by 20. She and her daughter, A'Lelia, migrated north to Denver, where in her spare time in 1905, she developed a formula for straightening African American hair. That business grew into a lucrative cosmetics empire. She moved her headquarters to Indianapolis where she married Charles Joseph Walker and took the title of Madame. Madame C. J. Walker Laboratories began sending out "Walker Agents" to black communities to sell her products, and thereafter Walker became the first black female millionaire.[7]

The impact of such migration stories was long. A'Lelia would later move to Harlem, the "Negro Capital of the World," where she would use much of the Walker fortune to help subsidize artists and writers who would make up the Harlem Renaissance, a movement that in and of itself was peopled by migrants. James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston came from Florida, Walter White and Georgia Douglas Johnson from Georgia. Arna Bontemps and Louis Armstrong came from Louisiana. Langston Hughes came from Missouri. "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame," Hughes wrote in 1926. "If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too." [8]

The Harlem Renaissance and its revolution in art, literature, theatre, and other forms of intellectual and cultural production could not have existed without Northern urban enclaves like Harlem and the wealth those enclaves generated. Artists and intellectuals needed patrons, and publishers needed a middle class black community with disposable income to spend on books and journals. So Harlem became a factory for cultural production, but with limited real estate available on the island of Manhattan, it was relatively devoid of actual factories. Such was reserved for other urban hubs.

Despite the first real broad-based success of black artists during the Harlem Renaissance, the number one attraction for black Southern migrants was factory jobs, which really became available on a large scale during the First World War. The industrial need created by the global conflict opened those factory jobs that had originally been closed to black migrants, and when they opened, those migrants responded in droves. Between 1915 and 1920, almost one million black Southerners left the region, swelling the populations of industrial cities like Chicago and Detroit.[9]

While those jobs were the salvation of many fleeing poverty and violence in the South, poverty didn't completely disappear and the violence simply changed forms. From 1917 to 1921 a series of violent race riots spread across the country, most in the hottest months of 1919, a period known as "Red Summer." In Chicago, for example, on July 27, 1919, Eugene Williams was swimming in Lake Michigan when he inadvertently drifted over into the "white" section of the lake. He was stoned by white people and drowned. The police didn't arrest any of the white attackers. Instead, they arrested a black man who complained that the police weren't doing their jobs. That incident set off a week of violence that left 23 black people and 15 white people dead. More than 500 were injured and almost 1,000 left homeless.[10] Just as the early version of the migration laid bare white Northern racism through selective hiring and residential segregation, the migration during World War I and in the decades that followed demonstrated, often through violence, that bigotry was not simply a Southern phenomenon.

A similar mass movement out of the South began at the onset of the Second World War, ushering in a period from the 1940s through 1960s when more than five million more black Southerners chose to leave. The nature of this last major wave of the Great Migration was different than its predecessors. Its initial spark was the creation by Franklin D. Roosevelt of the Fair Employment Practices Commission, which removed restrictions on black employment in the defense industry. Many of those defense jobs were in California, and so while the migration continued to increase black population figures in traditional Northern and Midwestern industrial areas, it also populated the urban centers of Northern and Southern California.

The continued growth of the urban population during World War II, then, expanded black income and made more people willing to join rights groups like the NAACP. Its membership hovered around 50,000 in 1940. By 1945, it was over 450,000.[11] In 1942, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was founded in Chicago, that early hub of the Great Migration, as a biracial organization that staged nonviolent protests against segregation. And it would be integral to the development of the Civil Rights Movement to come. It was CORE, for example, that really put the civil rights focus on the nonviolent protest tactics of Gandhi. It was CORE that developed sit-ins and other strategies that the broader civil rights movement would later adopt.

At the same time, migration and the rise of urban blacks put a rising percentage of the black population outside of the region emphasized by the first wave civil rights movement. The rights gains of the 1950s and 1960s largely missed those in Northern and western cities. At the time the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed, almost 30% of black households lived below the poverty line, while just about 8% of white families did. The black unemployment rate was double that of whites. Kenneth Clark famously explained, "The masses of Negroes are now starkly aware of the fact that recent civil rights victories benefited a very small percentage of middle-class Negroes while their predicament remained the same or worsened." [12]

Many of those impoverished black residents, particularly in urban areas, began to show their displeasure in new ways. The people of Watts, Los Angeles, for example, were not very interested in the Voting Rights Act. They had more pressing concerns. Unemployment in Watts was 31%. It was an inner-city black neighborhood policed by whites, and police brutality was common. On August 11, 1965, after a traffic stop drew a crowd and the police called for backup, people began throwing rocks at the cops, leading to an all-out riot. It went on for a week, and the governor of California called in the National Guard to lock down the area. In the end, the Watts Riots caused almost \$40 million in property damage. More than 4,000 people were arrested, there were almost 1,000 casualties, and 34 people were killed.[13]

These were new problems and they needed new solutions for a now-urban population growing increasingly frustrated that their needs were being lost in the shuffle of a civil rights movement that doggedly emphasized more overt forms of racism in the South. In response to urban poverty and police brutality outside of that region, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in Oakland in October 1966. The Panthers worked to protect black citizens from an abusive and predominantly white police force while simultaneously tackling other less salacious problems associated with urban life in one of the principal hubs of that second, western Great Migration. The Panthers saw themselves as filling a void on the left wing of the civil rights movement created by the death of Malcolm X, himself the leader of a radical rights and religious organization—the Nation of Islam, founded in 1930 in Detroit and a product of the earlier wave of black migrants from the South.

Such movements have not solved all problems for the children and grandchildren of black Southern migrants. Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton have described an urban segregation developing in the decades after the Great Migration that

eliminated almost all interracial contact for inner-city black residents, ensuring that those populations were ignored by political leaders. There in the North those migrants remained ravaged by poverty, crime, and drugs, sociological problems that have yet to completely dissipate.[14]

Poverty, crime, and drugs, however, are problems that also ravage the South, and thus the blame for such issues cannot be laid solely at the feet of the Great Migration. In total, the Great Migration was an overwhelming benefit to the African American community. It saved so many from the retrenchment of Southern redeemer governments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It developed a stable middle class, which provided the infrastructure required to foster cultural movements like the Harlem Renaissance. It led to the creation of valuable rights groups like CORE and the Black Panthers, and it demonstrated in myriad ways, from the Red Summer of 1919 to the Watts Riots of 1965, that racism and racial rights activism was not solely under the purview of the South. It forced whites outside of the former Confederacy to come to terms with race as a legitimate national issue, demonstrating that the distance between "hell holes" and "incipient civilization" was shorter than many Americans wanted to believe.

Notes:

[1] "Negroes Leave the South," *The Messenger* 2 (March 1920): 2.

[2] Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migrants to Kansas After Reconstruction* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986).

[3] Frederick Douglass, "The Negro Exodus from the Gulf States," *Journal of Social Science* 11 (May 1880): 18.

[4] Derron Davis, "Toward a Socio-Historical and Demographic Portrait of Twentieth-Century African-Americans," in *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, ed. Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 1-19.

[5] Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904-54* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

[6] Jonathan Gill, *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America* (New York: Grove Press, 2011).

[7] A'Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

[8] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation* 122 (23 June 1926), 692.

[9] James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[10] Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012).

[11] Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice and Sing: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New Press, 2010).

[12] Kenneth Clark, "The Present Dilemma of the Negro," *Journal of Negro History* 53 (January 1968): 10.

[13] Jerry Cohen and William S. Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn! The Los Angeles Race Riot, August 1965* (New York: Dutton, 1966).

[14] Douglas J. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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