

THE SOCIAL PROLOGUE TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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The South's defeat in the War for Southern Independence and the subsequent passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution put an end to slavery. But another half-century passed before the black population escaped the constraints associated with plantation agriculture. It was only then, from the beginning of World War I, that the struggle by African Americans for full political and economic rights had a reasonable prospect for success. Thus the prologue to the modern civil rights movement contained two elements: the limits on full citizenship imposed by the plantation economy and the successful effort by the black population to escape those constraints after World War I.

Most black people in the postbellum South remained, as they had under slavery, suppliers of inexpensive labor to the South's cotton plantations. But much had changed with Emancipation. Agricultural workers were no longer confined to work on a specific plantation. At the end of the crop-year a regional labor market was operative, and plantation workers were free to seek out employment on plantations

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other than the one they had worked on in the previous season (Wright 1986, pp. 90–98). Similarly, under pressure from the former slaves, the organization of work on plantations had been altered. No longer was gang labor the basic unit in which work was carried out. Now the household was the organizing unit of cultivation. Under the new regime, sharecroppers and share tenants were responsible for the cultivation of specifically identified acreages.

Despite these changes, black labor on plantations filled a subordinate role which provided it with little autonomy. To be sure, with the termination of property rights in people, planter prerogatives had been much reduced. Nevertheless, plantation owners possessed power on the plantations in excess of the kind of authority that management typically exercises in capitalist firms. The theorist of plantation societies, Edgar T. Thompson, traces the all-encompassing authority planters possessed to the large size and remoteness of plantations. Thompson writes that these two factors resulted in “a community in which the planter possesses power not only over the laborer’s job, but also over his home, his recreation and his daily relations with others.” Such careful monitoring, he goes on, inevitably results in “resentments and passions that must be contained, and to quarrels that must be adjudicated.” As a consequence, “the planter can be no mere landlord or farmer; he is also a chief of state and head of government” (1975, p. 29).

A key tool in planter control was the allocation of credit made available through a plantation store. The credit available to tenants, however, was restricted solely to retail purchases, and was not advanced to tenants to help finance investment by them. There was little scope for such investment since the means of production—plantation tools and equipment—preponderantly were owned by the planter. Borrowing from plantation sources thus was not a means by which black farmers could accumulate productive capital and attempt to move up the agricultural ladder. At the same time, retail credit too was limited and was rarely made available as cash. James C. Cobb writes that advances were “...confined to the fundamental necessities of food and clothing. A cropper living on advances was almost certain to be wearing the cheapest shoes and clothing available and subsisting on a diet of fat salt pork, cornbread and canned goods, mostly beans” (1992, p. 102).

Harold D. Woodman’s discussion of postbellum “modern business plantations” reinforces the view that plantation tenants were not independent farmers who happened to rent the land they cultivated. Wood-

man writes that the plantations “were large-scale, centrally organized business operations that were not simply groups of small independent tenant farmers renting from a single landlord.” Instead “managers on these plantations supervised all the work and made all management decisions concerning the production and sale of the crops.” In citing a plantation owner who described his operation as a “profit sharing” enterprise, Woodman comments that the “so-called partners worked under the close supervision of resident managers, and they received not a share of the profits but payment for work done.” Plantation sharecroppers and tenants thus by no means represented a class of independent farmers. Rather, again citing Woodman, “both tenants and croppers were part of a new agricultural proletariat. And almost without exception, this agricultural proletariat of tenants, croppers and wage workers on the business plantations were African Americans” (1995, pp. 105, 106).

The persistence of the plantation sector as a basic pillar of the Southern economy buttressed and intensified the stereotype of black inferiority in that region. For, as Thompson writes “the general idea behind plantation government is that Negroes have to be governed and governed differently from other men, because they themselves are different” (1975, p. 96). In light of the fact that difference in this context is understood to mean inferiority, plantation culture both justified the authoritarian structure of plantation production and management, and reinforced negative white attitudes with regard to black competence.

In this environment the paternalism of the slave plantation, emphasized by Eugene D. Genovese, survived Emancipation. To be sure, postbellum paternalism was, as Genovese himself suggests, an attenuated version of the dominant ethos of the slave era. Genovese writes that “the destruction of slavery meant the end of paternalism as the reigning ideal of work relations; it did not mean the total disappearance of paternalism as an ingredient in social relations.” In this regard, Genovese cites landlords in the Mississippi Delta region who “developed relationships with black (and white) tenant farmers during the twentieth century that echoed the patterns of the Old South.” Nonetheless he insists that “the exigencies of marketplace competition” militated against patriarchal responsibility (1974, pp. 661, 662).

In this connection Ronald Davis reports that in the Natchez District (Adams County, Mississippi, and Concordia Parish, Louisiana) what developed was a “new dependency” and a “new paternalism.” Accord-

ing to Davis, deference was inevitable in a setting in which the black population found itself "without farms and homes of their own, hopelessly impoverished, and unable to counter the intimidation tactics of the dominant white and racist society." At the same time, this continued dependency perpetuated among white planters "a sense of superiority and power that dominated even the marketplace." Nevertheless, insists Davis "this new dependency was not the same as slavery...blacks never functioned as the good and faithful laborers their former masters remembered them to have been in slavery" (1982, pp. 180, 181). Edward Ayers comes to roughly the same conclusion. He writes that "black people turned to whites when they felt they had no other choice," and cites the diary of a cotton planter in the Mississippi Delta in the 1890s to argue that "rural race relations often seemed marked by...personal ties, patronizing as well as helpful." But Ayers too provides evidence of the limits of paternalism in the postbellum era. He reports that the celebration of Christmas as a time of white gift-giving and ritualized freedom "faded in the highly mobile New South [while] vestiges of the tradition remained on some plantations" (1992, pp. 135, 134-135).

Continued plantation economic dominance thus meant that both class relations and the worldview present in the South remained different than those elsewhere in the United States. They possessed paternalistic elements which both were reminiscent of planter/slave relations and were largely absent elsewhere even in the rural North and West. What gave rise to this difference was that planter/cultivator relations in the South were more hierarchical than farmer/worker relations in the rest of the country where plantations were nonexistent and share tenantry was little practiced. Thompson captures the source of this regional differentiation by arguing that "...whatever is 'different,' whatever is special, about the South appears to go back to the plantation and to the system of institutions which has grown up around it" (1975, p. 86).

But the plantation economy that was reconstructed after Emancipation was not nearly as stable as the structure which slavery had supported. Plantation agriculture in all its forms is dependent upon a reliable supply of low-cost labor. A prolific slave population, of course, had ensured this availability. But unlike the case with slavery, the supply of cheap black labor during and after Reconstruction was dependent upon circumstances over which Southern planters did not have control. Black labor remained concentrated on plantations but only because African Americans found it difficult in practice extensively to find

alternative employment. Black land ownership grew only slowly (Kenzer 1997, pp. 9–35). In addition, the South's relative underdevelopment meant that few nonagricultural jobs were created in the region, only a small percentage of which in any case were open to the region's black population (Mandle 1992, pp. 24–25). Manufacturing employment in the North also failed to open up for blacks. Northern employers preferred immigrants from Europe to black immigrants from the South to satisfy their labor requirements. Virtually all of the 500,000 immigrants per year who came to the United States between 1870 and 1920 arrived and settled in the North. Their availability allowed industrial management to exercise their racial bias without paying for their prejudice either in the form of high labor costs or foregone production. Stanley Lieberson observes that an etiquette or set of norms developed among whites concerning the proper behavior of blacks. That etiquette defined "black efforts to reach equality as inappropriate" and "...called for blacks to remain in their status" while Europeans were expected to achieve upward economic mobility" (1980, pp. 31, 35, 348–349, 369).

But both slow Southern economic growth and the preference for immigrants in the Northern labor market were fragile props for the plantation economy. A change in labor market circumstances for African Americans outside of the plantation belt of the South possessed the potential to undermine the basis upon which successful plantation agriculture was undertaken. Indeed, the opening up of manufacturing jobs for blacks, either in the South or the North, would have deprived the plantation sector of the abundant supply of labor essential for its viability.

Despite its fragility, so long as the plantation structure remained intact, customary race relations prevailed. There was no need for legislation. In this context, rather than risk violent retaliation, black people in the South made the accommodations necessary for survival. As Thompson has written, "the authority and power of the planter were not required for daily use; time generated new customs, and everyone within the plantation community came to know what was expected of him [sic] and to feel some sense of obligation to meet those expectations" (1975, p. 99). In the "cultural and moral order" which prevailed in the South, legislation assigning specific forms of behavior by race was, for the most part, unnecessary. John W. Cell agrees, writing that in the rural South, "the personal power of planters and furnishing merchants continued to be institutionalized in crop-lien laws that were enforced by sheriffs, biased courts, and lynch mobs....the traditional

mechanisms of intimidation remained in good working order as effective instruments of social control" (1982, p. 133).

The same was not the case outside of plantation areas, even in the South. In cities, interracial contact was more complex than on plantations. There were no street cars or lunch counters on plantations, nor were there train stations or hotels. Thus the social conventions that dictated behavior in rural areas could not easily be reproduced in urban places. A new foundation different from the plantation framework was needed if the South's racial hierarchy was to prevail in the cities. As Cell puts it, "precisely because urban blacks were more autonomous and less vulnerable, their place was circumscribed in more detail" (1982, p. 133).

In his landmark 1955 book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, C. Vann Woodward argued that the South's "capitulation to racism" did not occur until the 1890s (1957, pp. 49–95). Woodward wrote that "rigid and universal" segregation did not appear in the region until near the end of the century and that during Reconstruction there had been "an era of experiment and variety in race relations...in which segregation was not the invariable rule" (1986, pp. 82–83). Even Woodward, however, thought that it would be "preposterous to leave the impression" that there had been "a golden age of race relations in the period between Redemption and segregation." On the contrary, he goes on, "the evidence of race conflict and violence, brutality and exploitation in this very period is overwhelming." But at the same time, Woodward believed that though there had been exploitation, subordination, and conflict in the early years after slavery, it was not inevitable that "the exploited had to be ostracized,...that the subordinates had to be totally segregated and needlessly humiliated by a thousand daily reminders of their subordination" (1957, pp. 25, 26).

Woodward's hypothesis that in the years after 1890 there was a sharp discontinuity in Southern race relations no longer is widely accepted. The fact that segregation, particularly in public accommodations, was codified after that year is not accepted as convincing evidence that those laws represented a new system of segregation. Rather, writes Howard N. Rabinowitz, this legislation "...added the force of additional laws to a system already widespread in practice." Nonetheless, the fact is that even his critics accept much of Woodward's basic outline concerning the course of segregation. Rabinowitz notes that "a consensus of sorts (although often unacknowledged) has been reached

that...during Reconstruction segregation was a widespread factor in southern life.” But at the same time “there is general agreement that something very important happened at the end of the 1880s.” Rabinowitz concludes that “although de jure segregation was more of a factor before the 1890s than Woodward and others have recognized, there is no denying its significant increase at the end of the century” (Rabinowitz 1994, pp. 32, 53, 53–54).

Indeed, black disfranchisement was on the political agenda from very early in the postbellum period. The exclusion of black voters was achieved through state legislation which typically combined elements of four approaches: a registration procedure designed to exclude blacks on grounds of residence, or criminal convictions; a poll tax; a literacy test; and a clause requiring that an election official be satisfied that a would-be voter correctly could interpret a clause of the state constitution. Restrictive electoral legislation was passed in Georgia in 1871, Mississippi in 1876, Virginia and North Carolina in 1877, South Carolina in 1882, and Florida in 1888. As a consequence, a steep drop in black electoral participation occurred after 1880. By the beginning of the 1890s, Cohen writes, “black voters were not yet banned from the polls, but from the perspective of most white Southerners, the end was in sight” (1991, pp. 204–205, 207).

Black disfranchisement was completed with two additional clusters of state legislation, the first between 1889 and 1895 and the second between 1898 and 1902. A new registration law in Louisiana reduced the percentage of black males eligible to vote from 95.6 to 9.5 percent, and by 1904 that figure had been further reduced to 1.1 percent. In Georgia black registration fell from 28.3 to 4.3 percent after new legislation was passed in 1908. In most of the South, particularly the plantation South, black disfranchisement was virtually total. While there were about three million blacks resident in Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama in 1930, the total number of black voters in these three states was estimated to be less than 15,000. Similarly there were only 3,500 voters in South Carolina and Louisiana, though the total combined black population of these two states was close to one and a half million (Rabinowitz 1992, pp. 112, 114, 115, 209, f.18; United States Bureau of the Census 1976, pp. A 172–194).

In contrast to the early start in denying the vote, segregation in public accommodations was not legislated until the beginning of the 1880s. This new phase in race legislation was initiated when Tennessee in

Table 1. African-American Population
in Selected Southern Cities, 1880, 1890

City	1880	1890	Percent Change
Nashville	16,337	29,395	79.9
Atlanta	16,330	28,098	72.1
Richmond	27,835	32,330	16.1
Montgomery	9,931	12,987	30.8
Raleigh	4,354	6,348	45.8
Louisville	20,905	28,651	37.1
Savannah	15,654	22,963	46.7
New Orleans	57,617	64,491	11.9
Total	168,963	225,263	33.3

Source: Nashville, Atlanta, Richmond, Montgomery: Rabinowitz (1978, Table 1, p. 19); Louisville, Savannah, New Orleans: Miller (1991, Table 5-1, pp. 18-19).

1881 passed a law requiring separate first-class accommodations by race on trains. Following that, every Southern state passed similar laws requiring segregation by race in public accommodations. Theaters, parks, transportation facilities, water fountains, bathrooms, and court buildings all were covered by such laws and were required to be available only on a racially segregated basis.

The codification of segregation in public accommodations testified of course to the salience of racist thinking in the South. But more specifically, that codification was rooted in the loss of control over the black population which the first exodus from the plantations represented.

Table 1 provides information on the black population resident in eight principal Southern cities in 1880 and 1890. In both years, African-American city dwellers represented a very small proportion of the black Southern population, 2.8 percent in 1880, and 3.3 percent in 1890. Nevertheless it is of significance that the black urban population grew by one-third during this 10-year period, substantially more than twice the rate of the Southern black population generally. Crediting Rabinowitz for pioneering the hypothesis, Cell writes that the "case for the urban origins of the [segregation] system is persuasive. Jim Crow, it seems, was not born and bred among 'rednecks' in the country. First and foremost he was a city slicker" (Cell 1982, p. 134.).

De jure segregation thus was a response to change. Though the plantation economy persisted and remained the dominant institutional source of racism in the South, its grip was weakening. With the beginning of their urbanization, African Americans had begun to escape plantation oppression. In cities there was a potential of a greater degree

of freedom than African Americans had ever experienced. But as the plantation structure started to lose its dominance in this way, the region resorted to the force of law to maintain its racial hierarchy. What could not be done through cultural hegemony, might be accomplished through the power of the state.

By the turn of the twentieth century three distinct, but interacting, elements of Southern society militated against black well-being and full citizenship. Privation, both economic and cultural, remained associated with plantation tenantry. The traditional caste structure associated with plantation agriculture remained in place though attenuated by the slow emergence of employment opportunities for African Americans in cities. To this situation was added segregation in public accommodations, bolstered by newly passed state legislation. Invariably, the separate facilities provided for the black population were demonstrably inferior to those supplied to white people. Finally, the exclusion of the black population from voting implied that only to the most limited degree were black interests represented in the political process. Disfranchisement, bolstered by the use of terror in the form of lynchings, meant it was all but impossible for black political action to effectuate positive change in the region.

Thus when the black population started to venture from the Black Belt, it confronted a relatively new set of controls and deprivations. Jim Crow ensured that the escape from plantation agriculture yielded precious little in terms of citizenship. By the turn of the century then, there was little hope that the black population could at any reasonable time in the future fully become citizens of the nation. In these circumstances race relations deteriorated. As Edward Ayers has written, "The things Southern whites and blacks said about one another at the turn of the century were so extreme, so filled with bitterness, hatred and confusion, that paraphrase fails. People of both races strained to find words harsh enough to describe their fear and anxiety" (1992, p. 426).

Having found themselves in this situation, writes Al-Tony Gilmore, "most black Southerners to some extent accommodated to the system" (1978, p. 78). They did so, as Leon F. Litwack observes "...from a sense of limited options, not because they placed any credence in the tenets of white superiority" (1998, p. 431). This was the context in which Booker T. Washington offered his accommodationist position. His effort was to design a strategy to advance, over the long term, the status of African Americans in the South, but to do so while reassuring

Southern opinion leaders that such advances would pose no threat to the region's institutions and power relationships. Washington's platform contained three related elements: first, the primacy of economic endeavor compared to political engagement; second, the desirability of industrial rather than theoretical and abstract education; and finally the anticipation that success for Southern blacks would result in the emergence of a black elite which could take its place unthreateningly in the region's electoral arena and social structure.

With regard to the priority of economic compared to political activity, Washington wrote: "In my mind there is no doubt but that we made a mistake at the beginning of our freedom of putting the emphasis on the wrong end. Politics and the holding of office were too largely emphasized, almost to the exclusion of every other interest" (1907, pp. 131-132). Twelve years earlier Washington had declared in his Atlanta Exposition Address of September 1895—the Atlanta Compromise—that "no race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized." Washington later wrote, "I do not believe that the world ever takes a race seriously in its desire to enter into the control of the government of a nation in any large degree, until a large number of individuals, members of that race, have demonstrated, beyond question, their ability to control and develop individual business enterprises" (1971, p. 7, 1907, p. 232).

Washington believed that generating a class of black business people required that African Americans receive industrial education. He argued that what was holding blacks back was the absence of the kind of training which would facilitate commercial success. He decried, for example, the fact that "notwithstanding that we have practically a whole race dependent upon agriculture...very little has been attempted by State or philanthropy in the way of educating the race in this one industry upon which its very existence depends." Washington acknowledged that "the Negro has the right to study law..." but he was dubious about the efficacy of doing so. Rather, "...success will come to the race sooner if it produces intelligent thrifty farmers, mechanics and housekeepers to support the lawyers" (1907, pp. 49, 69).

Finally, Washington held out the prospect of an emergent conservatism among successful African-American entrepreneurs. He explained that when Negroes become producers they would become "of immediate value to the community rather than one who yields to the temptation to live merely by politics or other parasitical employments." With

that the case, blacks would become property holders and “when a citizen becomes a holder of property, he becomes a conservative and thoughtful voter. He will more carefully consider the measures and individuals to be voted for.” At that moment, the white South will no longer need to fear black politics: African Americans owning “...neat and comfortable homes, possessing skill, industry and thrift, with money in the bank, and [becoming] large taxpayers cooperating with the white men in the South in every manly way for the development of their own communities and counties, will go a long way...toward changing the present status of the Negro as a citizen, as well as the attitude of the whites toward the blacks.” In short, when black people achieve economic success declared Washington, “I do not believe that in many portions of the South such men need long be denied the right of saying by their votes how they prefer their property to be taxed and in choosing those who are to make and administer the laws.” Washington approved of property and educational tests for voting since they “will cut off the large mass of ignorant voters of both races that is now proving so demoralizing a factor in the politics of the Southern States.” When that is done, and with the exclusion of citizens of both races who possessed insufficient education or property, Washington concluded, there will be in place a foundation “upon which to build a government that is honest and that will be in a high degree satisfactory to both races” (1907, pp. 153, 153–4, 155, 233, 144, 153, 242–243).

Washington’s accommodationism has been subjected to a withering criticism over the years. Writing as early as 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois attacked him as representative of “the old attitude of adjustment and submission.” He charged that Washington asked black people to give up political power, insistence on their civil rights, and higher education for Negro youth. Du Bois queried what had been “the result of this tender of the palm-branch” and answered disfranchisement, loss of status in civil society, and withdrawal of aid from institutions of higher learning. Though he conceded that these “are not, to be sure, direct results of Mr. Washington’s techniques,” he nevertheless argued that “his propaganda has, without a shadow of doubt, helped their speedier accomplishment” (1903, pp. 50–51).

Du Bois’s argument was that precisely Washington’s objective of economic self-advance was impossible of accomplishment given the losses in education and political power to which Washington had turned a blind eye. Without the suffrage, he argued, it was not possible for

working people and property owners to defend their interests. Du Bois maintained that the acceptance of inferiority in civil society was inconsistent with the self-respect essential to economic advance. He further believed that a decline in support for higher education meant that industrial schools would find themselves short of staff and be unable to accomplish the very goals set out for them by Washington. Du Bois asked "Is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meager chance for developing their exceptional men?" His answer was that "if history and reason give any distinct answer to these questions, it is an emphatic No" (1903, pp. 51, 52).

In all likelihood, Du Bois was right with regard to the circumstances required for black economic success. For that reason it is not possible to evaluate Washington's conjecture that with economic advance a black elite and elitist politics would develop. The available data for the period provide no indication of an upward trend in black entrepreneurship and wealth accumulation. In the Deep South over the period 1890–1910, black farm owners as a percentage of black farmers barely moved—increasing from 16 percent between 1890 and 1900, and remaining stable at 17 percent between 1900 and 1910. Similarly the value of property holding by blacks showed very little change during these years. In Georgia black property ownership averaged \$17.46 per family in 1890 and by 1910 it was \$26.59; in Louisiana there was virtually no change: \$16.46 in the earlier year and \$16.31 in the latter; in North Carolina the value of wealth holdings more than doubled, but even there the increase was only \$19.05, from \$14.07 to \$33.12, hardly a change suggesting the development of substantial black businesses (Schweninger 1990, p. 164; Higgs 1982, p. 720; Margo 1984, p. 770). Clearly the plantation South was not a place where the kind of black business success envisioned by Washington was making much headway.

But by the same token the Deep South was not a place where political advances could be achieved. Du Bois's program too could not be accomplished. Joel Williamson argues that the process of depriving blacks of the right to vote "was only a part of a larger and longer process that might be called the depoliticalization of the Negro." Williamson remarks that "most blacks, it seems, learned that lesson well." Williamson captures the dynamic of the process in the following terms: "blacks

moved downward from a practical inability to vote, to an inability to register to vote, to an inability even to participate in Democratic party activities and the Democratic primary...and, finally to an inability to maintain their undisputed representation in national Republican conventions, and hence, from that, by the 1920s, to a loss of federal patronage" (1986, pp. 153–154). The U.S. South, in short, had constructed juridical segregation, an arrangement which John W. Cell has described as "the highest stage of white supremacy" (1982, p. 231).

But even as the chains of the U.S. version of apartheid were put in place, World War I set in motion a pattern of change which led ultimately to segregation's demise. Seen in this perspective, what was important about the onset of war was that it virtually shut off the flow of international migrants coming to the United States. With international migration curtailed, employers in the North were compelled to overcome their aversion to employing black labor if they were to satisfy the growing labor requirements of industry, a growth which was particularly rapid in light of the military build-up associated with the war itself. In no decade before 1910 had black migration from the South exceeded 170,000. In the decade beginning in that year however, black migration more than doubled to more than 450,000, as migration from overseas became a trickle.

The significance of the discovery by employers of the pool of black labor in the South was made clear in the 1920s when international migration fell by another 12.5 percent. During that decade African-American migration increased by another 65 percent to almost 750,000 (Mandle 1992, pp. 25-27). The volume of this migration is the strongest possible evidence of responsiveness to labor market opportunities. As such it undermines Ronald E. Seavoy's thesis that Southern blacks were "peasants" few of whom "were interested in taking advantage of post-bellum commercial opportunities being created by planters and urban businessmen who sought to mobilize their labor" (1998, p. 326). As Neil McMillen has written concerning the migration from Mississippi, "with normal sources of cheap, white immigrant labor disrupted and the nation's labor needs sharply accelerated by the draft and industrial expansion, Afro-Americans who were once welcome in the urban North only in personal service occupations now found themselves in demand as unskilled and semiskilled industrial workers" (1989, p. 264).

The movement from the South at the time of World War I came to be known as the Great Migration. Its champions and promoters within the

black population saw it as an opportunity to escape oppression. One of the foremost promoters of South to North relocation, Robert Abbott, the publisher of the *Chicago Defender*, declared that “our problem today is to widen our economic opportunities, to find more openings and more kinds of openings in the industrial world. Our chance is right now” (quoted in Ottley 1955, p. 160). James R. Grossman, a student of the Great Migration, concluded that the movement North “drew upon black Southerners who looked to urban life and the industrial economy for the social and economic foundation of full citizenship and its perquisites” (1989, pp. 19, 59, 60, 261).

The move from the South was the clearest possible expression of the fact that the African-American population was giving up on the South. Not surprisingly, therefore, it elicited the opposition of Booker T. Washington. He counseled against migrating to the North. He thought that “the Negro is at his best in the Southern States.” Conceding that blacks in the North benefit from “certain privileges” not available in the South, Washington nonetheless argued that “when it comes to the matter of securing property, enjoying business opportunities and employment, the South presents a far better opportunity than the North.” Washington believed that “if we make ourselves intelligent, industrious, economical and virtuous, of value to the community in which we live, we can and will work out our salvation right here in the South” (1907, pp. 201–202, 195).

It did not take southern black migrants long to learn that the freedom they encountered in the North was badly flawed. Nonetheless, it was Du Bois who best captured the options available to African Americans in this period when he wrote in an article aptly titled, “Brother, Come North,” that “the North is no paradise, but the South is at best a system of caste and insult and at worst a Hell” (1920, pp. 105–106).

The Great Migration of the 1920s was just the beginning of a massive relocation experienced by the black population. Though the rate of out-migration from the South declined during the depression years of the 1930s, migration even in this decade stood at levels higher than any except in the 1910s and 1920s. Thereafter the movement of blacks from the South exploded. The rates of migration of Southern blacks during the 1940s through the 1960s represent a movement of people which ranks among the highest recorded in demographic history. Almost 1.1 million black people left the South between 1910 and 1930, an out-migration which swelled to a little less than 4.5 million in

the 30 years between 1940 and 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1979, Table 8).

The implications of the migration for the African-American population were profound. It ultimately converted a Southern and rural population into one which was located overwhelmingly in cities. But even between 1910 and 1940, when the process was far from complete, the results of the migration were important. Between those two years the percent of the black population resident in the South fell from 89 to 77 percent. Similarly, black urbanization was extremely rapid. The percentage of African Americans living in urban areas increased from 27 percent in 1910 to 49 percent in 1940 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1979, Tables 5 and 6). This near doubling of the percentage of black urban dwellers in only 30 years may well have been what prompted Richard Wright to remark "perhaps never in history has a more unprepared folk wanted to go to the city; we were barely born as a folk when we headed for the tall and sprawling centers of steel and stone" (1941, p. 93).

The decline of plantation dominance and the urbanization of the black population brought to a close the period of accommodation associated with the ascendancy of Booker T. Washington. As John Egerton has put it, "Booker T. Washington's deferential tone of conciliation and submission seemed to have gone to the grave with him in 1915" (1994, p. 54). The move to the North allowed blacks to participate increasingly in the political process. Though voting rights did not yet extend to African Americans even in the urban South, successful nonelectoral mobilizations were more likely to be accomplished in cities such as Birmingham and Atlanta, than in rural hinterlands. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League made their first large-scale organizational advances in this growing urban context. Even in the rural South, blacks found in the increasing scarcity of labor occasioned by the migration, a lever by which to extract concessions (McMillen 1991, p. 88). For the first time, that is, the African-American population in the United States found itself in an environment in which successful political mobilization not only was needed but actually had become feasible. Unprepared as they might have been, in short, the black people who moved to the cities were the pioneers responsible for creating the conditions which gave birth to the modern civil rights movement.

The escape from the plantation economy thus had created circumstances in which African Americans were able to fight for their rights.

It was not a struggle easily won. Even after World War II, Jim Crow continued to prevail in the South and discrimination was widespread throughout the nation. But having left the rural South and the oppressive controls present in the system of plantation agriculture, the black population found itself in a more favorable environment from which to mount its struggle for full citizenship than had ever before been the case.

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