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History 220 – North of Jim Crow, South of Freedom
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Was the First Great Migration a Success or Failure?

The First Great Migration developed from the political and racial oppression African Americans experienced in the South, especially in the wake of Reconstruction. Between 1890 and 1910, white southerners created Jim Crow laws that suppressed the political rights of African Americans. In response, black southerners began to look to other areas of the country where they could achieve economic and political equality. The migration was foremost a search for luxuries political freedom, namely the right to vote and the right to run for public office. It also represented a desire to escape the harsh economic realities of the sharecropping system. African Americans also desired to live in a place where white racial violence did not exist. As lynching became more prevalent across the South, black southerners were compelled to pack up their bags and head northward and westward. Given the challenges they encountered, however, the first phase of the Great Migration was not the success black migrants envisioned during their exodus to the North.

Their dream was not just to achieve racial equality but also to secure better jobs and political opportunity. Here I argue Whereas the South's segregationist system had been underpinned by law, African Americans confronted a northern version of Jim Crow that was supported informally by practice. In particular, white race liberals in the North viewed statutory remedies as sufficient. They espoused what became known as northern racial liberalism, that is, they advocated for political equality of all races but cautioned that the state could not intervene into existing political and social relations to enforce that equality. The results were predictable.

Black migrants confronted an informal color line that mirrored the barriers they faced in the South. More specifically, they faced discrimination in housing and in the industrial sectors of the North (especially in cities like Chicago, Detroit and New York). While their movement out of the South signaled an end to their suffering within the brutal sharecropping, with its dependency on black labor, they were forced to work in the least-skilled, lowest paid jobs in the North. Employers like Henry Ford hired black workers but placed them into the dirtiest jobs where the prospects of growth were nil. In many ways, this was done to maintain the status quo while solving the manpower shortages that had been created by World War I and the abatement in European immigration¹.

But as Martin Luther King later indicated, racism in the North may have not been as readily noticeable but it was still present in the gentler form of the “white moderate who preferred order to justice.”² In essence, white northerners desired to maintain the existing racial order while maintaining urban peace rather than pursuing real equality and justice. Later on African-Americans gained some respect as a result of the United States’ rivalry with the Soviet Union, but Hall notes that this “Cold War” racial liberalism obstructed real progress³ – for instance, the State Department and the Dixiecrats distinguished civil liberties from economic justice, causing organizations like the NAACP to turn most of their efforts toward specific instances of de jure discrimination in the South for maximum efficacy⁴.

¹ Discussed in class.

² (Theoharis, 2018 p. 10)

³ (Hall, 2005 p. 1249)

⁴ (Ibid., p. 1250)

The “extreme materialism and militarism” described by King⁵ is still very prevalent in America; Theoharis highlights the ongoing problem of racial inequality that has not been fully addressed by politicians such as Obama.⁶ As the long civil rights struggle is memorialized by the media, we can see how politicization **undermines** the original intent of the First Great Migration, which was to escape deep-seated prejudice **that existed in the South**. **Therefore, many of initial** goals of the First Great Migration ~~which included leaving behind segregation and inequality~~ have not been fulfilled.

Instead of the First Great Migration being a total success, African Americans found themselves embroiled in a continuing **battle for civil rights**. **They struggled against white resistance to racial progress..** Trotter **explains** that many **black** migrants **were segregated into ghettos and were met with legal restrictions and violence when they attempted to move into white neighborhoods**.⁷ Statistical measures of dissimilarity (isolation and segregation) rapidly rose from 1880 to 1940 even as the Great Migration continued in many cities from Chicago to Brooklyn.⁸ Higher-status blacks lived in black neighborhoods⁹ that were arguably more restrictive than those **they encountered** in the South. Even as housing discrimination **and redlining** were outlawed, the ghetto persisted **in large part** due to, as Trotter **asserts**, **boundaries and social attitudes** that remained integral to Northern society.¹⁰ These factors indicate that the

⁵ (Theoharis, 2018 p. 10)

⁶ (Ibid., 2018 p. 10)

⁷ (Trotter, 2002 p. 23)

⁸ (Trotter, 2002 p. 25)

⁹ (Ibid., p. 31)

¹⁰ (Ibid., p. 32)

First Great Migration, while it led to relative economic improvements for black migrants, did not completely allow them to achieve fully their dreams of racial progress.

Against the constant scrutiny of the African-American community and the attacks on labor agencies and Pullman porters¹¹, the First Great Migration was partially successful in achieving racial solidarity with Jack Johnson and the general idea of a New Negro. These concepts culturally transformed America as African Americans abandoned passivity in favor of agency. The racial problems they faced, however, continued. For example, in 1919, a black teenager, Eugene Williams, was stoned to death after he accidentally swam beyond the informal color boundary at the 29th Street Beach.¹² Thus, even as African Americans developed a “New Negro” consciousness—defined by Carroll Binder as one who supports top-down community organization, interracial cooperation, and entrepreneurship¹³)—they continued to confront racial inequities and violence largely in response to their migration.

Respectability politics, often espoused by black elites to help migrants adapt to life in the North, a “white” way of life, proved to be an ineffectual strategy for achieving racial reform. For instance, black patrons were heavily discouraged from attending Loop theaters and when they did were ordered to sit in the Jim Crow section in the balcony.¹⁴ While sanctions were enforced on theaters following a landmark court decision¹⁵ and there were widespread protests, these demonstrations conformed to the Old Settlers’ conception of “respectable” behavior. In fact,

¹¹ (Baldwin, 2007 p. 14)

¹² (Ibid., p. 15)

¹³ (Ibid., p. 17)

¹⁴ (Baldwin, 2007 p. 96)

¹⁵ (Ibid., p. 95)

CCRR reports **chronicling the incident** described victims as well-mannered or “two of our most representative people.”¹⁶ Therefore, respectability politics ensured that any racial uplift was defined by white standards.

Successes **were realized as a result of the migration**. Despite his imperfections, the boxer Jack Johnson tested white assumptions of black inferiority with black leaders rallying behind him when he was arrested **under** the “White Slave Traffic Act.”¹⁷ While racial uplift comedies are sometimes viewed by historians as negative depictions of black people, we can see how films like *The Railroad Porter* (1913)¹⁸ developed because of the First Great Migration and inspired the **initial** steps toward progress that would not have been possible in the South due to de jure racism. African Americans also succeeded in the opportunity to practice blues and jazz music ala Dorsey, who found employment in the Chicago.¹⁹

The principal drawback of the First Great Migration would be the housing shortages – although legislation like the Perkins Bill protected renters from landlords hiking rents, these laws were very individualistic and so disregarded racial segregation as an issue in cities like Harlem.²⁰ Housing in Detroit was also dismal with restrictive covenants, real estate codes, and social prejudice preventing African-Americans from exercising their agency.²¹ The Northern version of Jim Crow was very much in effect with housing. Unlike the South, the industrial North was able

¹⁶ (Ibid., p. 97)

¹⁷ (Ibid., p. 111)

¹⁸ (Ibid., p. 119)

¹⁹ (Ibid., p. 164-65)

²⁰ (King, 2015 p. 118-19)

²¹ (Bates, 2012 p. 32)

to restrict residents to regions known as black belts²² in order to maintain property values. When Ossian and Gladys Sweet moved into the lower middle-class Garland neighborhood, people began mobbing their home, which they legally defended to their detriment.²³ As such, the Secretary of the NAACP, James Weldon Johnson, lamented times “when the most persistent integrationist becomes an isolationist”²⁴ which is further evidence that the first migrants’ dream of a promised land was shattered by the Northern version of Jim Crow.

²² (Bates, 2012 p. 94)

²³ (Ibid., p. 106-07)

²⁴ (Ibid., p. 112)

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