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History 220 – North of Jim Crow, South of Freedom
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January 24, 2019

Was the First Great Migration a Success or Failure?

The First Great Migration arguably developed from the disenfranchisement that African-Americans faced in the South – from about 1890 to 1910, the post-Civil War South reinstated Jim Crow laws excluding African-Americans from political interests. This migration was foremost a search for luxuries such as the right to vote and serve in public office in face of white monopolization of the sharecropping system. When lynching had become a socially accepted activity in the South, African-Americans were forced to pursue better opportunities in the North. In this essay, I will argue that the First Great Migration was less of a success than it is purported to have been by outlining some of the additional problems that millions of African-Americans faced when they migrated to the North.

Their dream was not just racial equality but also political flexibility and jobs. Here I argue that the “separate but equal” policy of the South was mirrored by the Northern version of Jim Crow, better known as Northern racial liberalism (which viewed statutory remedies as sufficient). I will also argue that they faced more restrictions with regards to housing due to the industrial market system of the North (especially in cities like Chicago, Detroit and New York). I agree that there were some successes – for instance, toppling the system of sharecropping (which depended on African-American labor) and bringing more exposure to the drama and brutality of the long civil rights struggle often sugarcoated by the media. Employers like Henry Ford hired black workers to maintain the status quo and replace decreases in immigration¹.

¹ Discussed in class.

But as Martin Luther King said, racism in the North may have been out of sight but was still present in the soft form of the “white moderate who preferred order to justice”². This means that they preferred economics over real 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.

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 Obama⁶. As the long civil rights struggle is memorialized by the media, we can see how politicization warps the original intent of the First Great Migration which was to escape deep-seated prejudice. So some of the original goals of the First Great Migration which included leaving behind segregation and inequality have not been fulfilled.

I argue that instead of the First Great Migration being a total success, African-Americans found themselves embroiled in a continuing long civil rights struggle amplified by whites’ lack of social responsibility in the North and the unique creation of the African-American ghetto caused by the Northern industrial economy. Trotter notes that many African-American migrants

² (Theoharis, 2018 p. 10)

³ (Hall, 2005 p. 1249)

⁴ (Ibid., p. 1250)

⁵ (Theoharis, 2018 p. 10)

⁶ (Ibid., 2018 p. 10)

became stuck in these ghettos due to endemic violence and legal restrictions in the North⁷. 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 Brooklyn⁸. Higher-status blacks lived in black neighborhoods⁹ that were arguably more restrictive than those in the South. Even as redlining and housing discrimination were outlawed, the ghetto persisted due to, as Trotter says, social opinions and boundaries that remained integral to Northern society¹⁰. These factors indicate that the First Great Migration, while it led to relative economic improvements, was not a total success in achieving its dream.

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. However, the problems they faced continued – in 1919, the black teenager Eugene Williams was stoned to death just for swimming across the color boundary at the 29th Street Beach on fabricated legal grounds¹². So the New Negro (defined by Carroll Binder as one who supports top-down community organization, interracial cooperation, and entrepreneurship¹³)

⁷ (Trotter, 2002 p. 23)

⁸ (Trotter, 2002 p. 25)

⁹ (Ibid., p. 31)

¹⁰ (Ibid., p. 32)

¹¹ (Baldwin, 2007 p. 14)

¹² (Ibid., p. 15)

¹³ (Ibid., p. 17)

faced many difficulties in view of the racial violence that erupted in the North as a response to the First Great Migration.

Respectability politics, originally invented to help migrants adapt to a “white” way of life, largely failed and gave way to a broader concept of the Metropolis in places like Chicago. For instance, black patrons were heavily discouraged from coming to Loop theaters and were made to sit in a Jim Crow section on the balcony¹⁴. While sanctions were enforced on theaters following a landmark court decision¹⁵ and there were protests, these protests conformed to respectability politics’ conception of how African-Americans should behave – CCRR reports 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 have been made; despite his imperfections, the boxer Jack Johnson tested white assumptions of black inferiority with black leaders rallying behind him when he was arrested using 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 first 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 milieu¹⁹.

¹⁴ (Baldwin, 2007 p. 96)

¹⁵ (Ibid., p. 95)

¹⁶ (Ibid., p. 97)

¹⁷ (Ibid., p. 111)

¹⁸ (Ibid., p. 119)

¹⁹ (Ibid., p. 164-65)

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 Harlem²⁰. Housing in Detroit was also dismal with restrictive covenants, real estate codes, and social prejudice preventing African-Americans from exercising their agency²¹. The Northern version of Jim Crow was very much in effect with housing. Unlike the South, the industrial North was able to restrict residents to regions known as black belts²² in order to maintain property values. When the Ossian and Gladys Sweets' family moved into the lower-middle class Garland neighborhood, people began mobbing their home which they legally defended to their detriment²³. As such, 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.

²⁰ (King, 2015 p. 118-19)

²¹ (Bates, 2012 p. 32)

²² (Bates, 2012 p. 94)

²³ (Ibid., p. 106-07)

²⁴ (Ibid., p. 112)

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