

Dean Gladish
History 220 – North of Jim Crow, South of Freedom
Professor Tyran Steward
February 14, 2019

The North's Informal Color Line and the Northern Jim Crow

In this essay I hope to describe how, starting with the Great Migration, various social attitudes including respectability politics and northern racial liberalism collectively and indirectly contributed to what we call the northern version of Jim Crow. I focus on specific laws and social attitudes that inhibited the improvement of the situation that African Americans faced in light of a laissez-faire approach **by northern race liberals who advocated against** state intervention while disregarding the historical dependence of African Americans on the state. I will conclude by stating how the Jim Crow laws left their mark on the laws and attitudes we see today as a result of northern racial liberalism which consists of equality on paper without effort made to resolve the longstanding inequity that exists.

One main object of focus is how the past is politicized and used by various politicians to reframe the present as a form of progress. During President Trump's first month in office, he praised Frederick Douglass as someone who has "done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more."¹ This quote exemplifies how African Americans are lauded for their achievements **within** the long civil rights struggle **as part of our** national **historical memory but whose effort to achieve equality are** largely dismissed as a thing of the past. **In this regard,** I agree with political scientist Fred Harris and his assessment that respectability politics have shifted toward "policing the black poor" during 1980s and 90s². Further, I would say that

¹ Theoharis, 18.

² Ibid., 20.

blaming the African-American community for its perceived lack of progress is an example of northern racial liberalism itself because it involves a public perception in which society judges militant activists not individualistically but based on their racial identification. When Obama referred to “individualized personal responsibility” at Brown Chapel in Selma, Alabama, in 2007,³ it is arguable that he has also been influenced by an individualistic form of northern racial liberalism that advocates for bootstrap agency under the guise of individual freedom of choice.

Theoharis also notes the use of passive voice in historical documents by writing that “the objects of racism are many but the subjects few”⁴. What this means is that the long civil rights movement has become overly historicized and thus useless because it is largely used as a means of remembering heritage and disregarding the perpetrators of racism. Thus, the problem of racism which is to remain separate but equal persists by placing civil rights in the past. As an example of this proclamation of equality on paper, in 1964 Boston School Committee chair William O’Connor declared that “We have no inferior education in our schools. What we have been getting is an inferior type of student”⁵. In essence this argument shows how a northern Jim Crow was shaped through rephrasing inequality in educational provision based on a cultural argument. It is also interesting to note the language used by various apparatuses of the media – the term “busing”, while initially criticized by anti-desegregation whites such as the *Globe*’s Robert Levey, became common in descriptions of white opposition to Black demands for school desegregation⁶.

³ Theoharis, 20.

⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁶ Ibid., 105-06.

The national fable as indicated by Theoharis also does not include harassment and monitoring of individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr. on the part of the government and FBI⁷; as a result we tend to focus on telling a story about specific individuals instead of looking at the various community-related factors that expressed themselves in an individualistic form.

There is also some merit to the argument that the conception of the New Negro coincided with the formation of an informal color line. As Trotter **explains**, African-Americans entered primarily urban industries as a New Deal welfare state emerged and civil rights movements became increasingly militant in the 1950s and 60s.⁸ So while black residents conceived of a New Negro in the form of respectability politics they were progressively (regardless of class) confined more and more to urban ghettos.⁹ The fact of residential segregation that followed the Great Migration is clear. And despite Lieberman's point that "if the black population base is large enough, there will be support for black doctors, black clergy, and so on, even if they remain totally unacceptable to others"¹⁰ we could argue that the New Negro ideal focused more on integration rather than support for a separate and successful metropolis that would give support to said individuals.

Another example of the informal color line would be the way in which black reformers in interwar Detroit consistently sought to present the black community in an attractive way to white employers. In practice, this meant not only educated but also well-mannered and fair-skinned.¹¹

⁷ Theoharis, 179.

⁸ Trotter, 33.

⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰ Trotter, 28-29.

¹¹ Wolcott, 76.

Therefore, we can see how respectability politics and the housing situation confining formerly rural black migrants to urban ghettos directly contributed to the northern Jim Crow as social stereotypes of black women were exacerbated.

Because African-American community reformers were so hard-set on promoting a positive image within the realm of respectability politics, 1920s Detroit quickly became an area of focus for elites who did not approve of mixing class, moral and racial boundaries¹². And because of the lack of economic prosperity, leisure activities became opportunities for economic advancement¹³. So it was also division within the African-American community along class lines that nullified any benefits of a large population base and thus reduced support for the ideal New Negro as envisioned by bourgeois respectability politics because the black community was very much dependent on industrialists like Henry Ford. Additionally, African-Americans sought to refute negative stereotypes using borrowed Victorian ideology¹⁴, and as industrialists like Henry Ford misused their economic responsibility to employ black workers with high turnover rates and promote the status quo through newspapers, we can see the beginnings of how polite racism took over when overt Southern-style racism became bad for business.

While white leftist papers such as the *Call* and the *Freeman* announced the arrival of the New Negro and praised an interracial proletarian movement¹⁵, there was still a great deal of controversy not with jazz but with people like Ossian Sweet becoming a doctor and transcending class boundaries. So while the porter and *Chicago Defender* writer Micheaux might have argued

¹² Wolcott, 91.

¹³ Ibid., 91-92.

¹⁴ Ibid., 150.

¹⁵ Baldwin 12.

that a lack of “personal bravery” and overabundance of “social demagogues” limited opportunities within black communities¹⁶, I would say that the realist subject matter of *Within Our Gates*, which involves miscegenation and racial violence associated with blacks fleeing the South as perceived by a black physician Dr. Vivian in the north¹⁷, demonstrates Micheaux’s knowledge that the informal color line in the North consisted of very real social perceptions and behaviors not just related to sundown suburbs¹⁸ but also to a larger system of race management that permeated the black community itself.

Much has been debated over whether branches of the YMCA such as the all-black Wabash, through “welfare capitalism” and restricting black citizens to all-black teams¹⁹, contributed to the northern color line. Arguably it did because black people were allowed to engage in select activities but if they did anything to threaten the status quo as happened in the case of Ossian Sweet their lives were often put in danger. As we discussed in class with Willis Ward and the company-church alliance, black people were only allowed to maintain a separate existence wherein economic mobility was highly discouraged. That means that the loyalty of African-American workers to manufacturing companies, which was largely exacerbated by the informal racial exclusion they faced upon entering the North, was essentially used as a means of pressuring them heavily to engage with athletic organizations that offered little compensation. So while there were socialist and communist organizations that supported Ossian Sweet and athletes like Willis Ward (who subsequently turned their back on these organizations for Henry

¹⁶ Ibid., 142.

¹⁷ Ibid., 148.

¹⁸ Discussed in class.

¹⁹ Baldwin, 207.

Ford), these were also part of a broader system of race management wherein bootstrap agency and respectability politics were ineffective because African-Americans relied so heavily on organizations such as the YMCA and NFL which dictated where they decided to live and work.

In the case of Ossian Sweet, the Judge Murphy provided a fair trial to African-American defendants in order to boost his political reputation and openly professed racial liberalism defined by a refusal to support black rights when it came to disturbing power relationships and racial geography²⁰. Because of Murphy's refusal to sufficiently address conflict when it occurred, the economic and social inequities faced by the African-American community persisted.

So on one hand white employers evaded requests to employ more black workers²¹ while other idealistic organizations such as the Communist Party supported civil rights but refused to include substantial numbers of African-American attendants in their meetings.²² Thus, it is obvious that northern racial liberalism played a crucial role in creating ideological support for the long civil rights struggle while shirking personal responsibility. As noted, state laws tended to be mostly ineffective in amending discriminatory practices.

Despite shifts in the old settler gospel mentality to a more active approach as seen in Detroit²³ and the Supreme Court's recognition of the Ford Motor Company's unfair labor practices²⁴, Henry Ford's admonition that he would "never submit to any union"²⁵ demonstrates

²⁰ Miller, 84-85.

²¹ Ibid., 210.

²² Ibid., 221.

²³ Bates, 204.

²⁴ Ibid., 242.

²⁵ Ibid., 244.

an expression of the persistent social attitude of northern racial liberalism that maintains elements of Jim Crow to this day through a non-coercive system of race management that maintains the status quo.

References:

Baldwin, D. (2007). *Chicago's New Negroes*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Bates, B. (2012). *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Miller, K. (2017). *Managing Inequality - Northern Racial Liberalism In Interwar Detroit*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Theoharis, J. (2018). *A More Beautiful and Terrible History - The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Trotter, J. (2002). The Great Migration. *OAH Magazine of History*, 17 (1).

Wolcott, V. (2001). *Remaking Respectability - African American Women in Interwar Detroit*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. Chapters 1 and 4.