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INCIDENCE UPON THE NEGROES

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the marginal status of Negro workers both in industry and agriculture the depression began for them ahead of American workers generally. In industrial centers their unemployment rates have consistently exceeded the rate for white workers, due both to mass employment on the common labor level of those industries most seriously curtailed and to increased racial competition. Recovery programs have tended on the whole to follow regional practices with respect to types of work and relief. In many urban centers larger proportions of Negroes are permitted in the relief rolls in consideration of higher unemployment rates. In rural areas the proportions on relief and amounts spent per person have been less than the white, despite greater need.

The year 1929 did not mark the beginning of the acute unemployment situation for the Negroes. In industry it could be observed as early as 1927 that their temporary importance was waning. There were attempts to induce and even compel, where possible, the return of surplus Negro labor to the South. In numbers of southern cities, not yet aware that nation-wide unemployment was impending, direct replacement of Negro by white labor was encouraged. By 1929 it was conservatively estimated that there were no less than 300,000 Negro industrial workers unemployed, and employment offices were able to place less than a third of the applicants.

There is a striking consistency, throughout the industrial centers, in the unemployment ratios for Negro workers. With a few notable exceptions, the proportions of Negroes unemployed are from 30 to 60 per cent greater than for white workers. Factors not directly related to race have been responsible for a part of the great losses. The Negro workers in the cities have been concentrated in the heavy industries. Practically all of these have been forced to reduce output, resulting in large lay-offs. Moreover, the largest single concentration of Negro workers in industry has been in building construction, and this field has been notoriously quiescent since the beginning of the depression. As early as 1930 the highest recorded unemployed group of American workers was that of building laborers. The vertical displacement downward of unskilled workers has operated without special design to increase the number of Negroes un-

employed. Similarly, the curtailed incomes of persons of moderate salaries have forced discontinuance of the luxury of domestic servants, thus reducing Negro employment in another important field.

It was inevitable that in the administration of the National Recovery Act there should be encountered a conflict between the theory of the Act and customary practices with respect to Negro workers. In northern cities, where the question of wage differentials for the same grade of work, chiefly unskilled and semi-skilled, has not been important, there has been little effect of the codes. In such centers as Pittsburgh, where Negroes have been employed in important numbers in the steel industry, no significant loss of employment through displacement by white workers has been felt. In smaller establishments in the North, such as hotels and light manufacturing plants and laundries, entire Negro crews have been released and all whites employed. Occasionally such action has been modified by a shift back to Negro workers when the new arrangement proved less satisfactory.

More serious difficulties have developed around the codes for industries in the South, where the customary level of wages generally is lower than in the North, and the wages of Negroes lower than the wages of white workers. The necessity, under the code, for raising wages for jobs held by Negroes had the effect of lending added attractiveness to Negro jobs for a large body of unemployed white workers. As a measure of economy, many jobs were combined by small employers and given added responsibility, thus automatically eliminating other Negro workers. By far the most widespread effect has been a result of the forcing to the wall of numerous small substandard businesses which had been able to operate only by paying extremely small wages. In these the jobs have been held largely by Negroes.

Over a third of all Negro workers are in agriculture. Urbanization has been forced by a long period of decline in agriculture. Tenancy for both races has grown, and the decline in Negro ownership has been persistent. The general depression reached the South when it was already prostrate and sadly crippled by an outworn tenant system. With the increase in cotton-growing countries throughout the world and the loss of cotton export markets, it has now become evi-

dent that the old cotton area of the Southeast, where the bulk of the Negroes live, will perhaps never regain its old position.

The recovery measures aimed at stabilizing the price of cotton suspended the collapse of the system, and assumed certain of the risks of the owners, but left virtually untouched the large tenant population, of which the Negroes constituted 55 per cent. The Agricultural Adjustment Act aided the large owner by pegging cotton prices and by providing essential credit and government subsidy for non-productive activity. For the most part, however, the old methods of handling the tenant have persisted under federal subsidy. The reduction program of 1933 and 1934 made possible a withdrawal of land from cultivation and, despite the mild and ineffectual caution expressed in the act, resulted in a corresponding reduction in the number of tenant contracts. Even for those who remained there was striking and often indefensible inequality in the distribution of the benefits of the subsidy. The cotton-reduction program, accelerating current trends, has thus succeeded in eliminating approximately 30 per cent of the Negro tenants from agriculture. The "furnishing" system, by which a bare subsistence was possible over the crop season, is in rapid collapse, and these tenants, without other recourse, drift about aimlessly until they can establish themselves on relief. Gordon W. Blackwell's study of tenant displacement in North Carolina,¹ where cotton and tobacco have been the important crops, provides another index to the general trends. In this state alone there were between 8,000 and 11,000 tenant farm families without a crop for 1934, and about 75 per cent of these families were on relief.

Generally considered, the 1934 agricultural program and the Bankhead Act have been almost exclusively the instruments of the landlord. The only benefits that appear to have been derived are the indirect ones resulting from an increase in prices, and this has not been observed as yet to have conspicuously aided the general predicament of the tenant.

The high unemployment figures for Negroes are reflected in relief rolls, where relief has been equally available to white and Negro

¹ Gordon W. Blackwell, "The Displaced Tenant Farm Family in North Carolina," *Social Forces* (October, 1934), pp. 65-73.

families. In 1933 a census of persons on relief showed 2,117,644 Negroes of all ages receiving aid. This was 17.8 per cent of all Negroes and 18.4 per cent of all cases on relief, although Negroes are only 9.4 per cent of the population. The percentages on relief varied by states from 4.3 per cent of the total Negro population in Virginia to 36.6 per cent in Florida and 38.0 per cent in Ohio. Although in general the Negroes have exceeded the whites by a considerable margin in most states, the proportions are not always an accurate index to Negro unemployment. In Mississippi, for example, where the population is about evenly divided, and the Negroes admittedly in greater economic need, there were 91,375 Negroes (9.0 per cent) and 136,339 whites (13.7 per cent) on relief.

TABLE I

City	Percentage of Negroes in Population	Percentage of Negroes in Relief Load
Detroit	7.6	29.6
Pittsburgh	8.2	32.0
St. Louis	11.3	35.0
New York	4.7	13.3
New Orleans	26.1	67.0
Birmingham	29.7	69.0
Greensboro (N.C.)	26.2	67.0
Nashville	27.8	39.9

The numbers on relief have been mounting in all sections since 1933 in both northern and southern areas, as the figures for selected cities in 1934 indicate (Table I). It is obvious in the figures in Table I that the relief administrators in urban centers have recognized the unequal stress of unemployment on Negroes and have permitted a liberal margin in relief. This was not so frequently the case in the earlier years of the depression.

The administration of rural relief has been more erratic and uncertain than in urban centers. Removed from the glare of public criticism, the practice of the local administrators, who have been for the most part identified with the tenants in the capacity of landlords, has been determined largely by individual standards of fairness and their notions of expediency. A complete analysis of the federal relief

program in the state of Georgia, by Dr. Arthur Raper of the Commission on Interracial Co-operation, reveals some interesting tendencies. Taking the state as a whole, he found three racial differentials: (1) a larger proportion of the white than of the Negro population was on relief despite the fact that the whites own practically all the land and all other productive properties in the state, while the Negroes were chiefly the impoverished tenants; (2) in over 80 per cent of the counties the amount spent upon whites per person for direct relief exceeded the amount spent for the Negro; and (3) with respect to certain forms of work-relief on public projects there had been a serious disregard of the quota for Negroes, based upon either population proportion or need.

In agriculture the emergency aid which has most frequently reached the Negro small farmer, apart from direct relief, has been in the form of feed and seed loans under the Federal Emergency Crop Production Loans. These provided a source of small credit which, in samples of four counties taken in 1933,² averaged from \$51.34 to \$108.80. Repayment of these loans has been high. Under the Farm Credit Act production credit associations have recently been organized. Although this service is just beginning and contemplates loans larger than \$100, the Negro farmers have not yet begun to use it adequately. The pattern of Negro and white participation in associations is too new in southern agricultural areas to make this an easy source of credit for the Negroes. Moreover, the requirement of purchase of shares, and the cost of legal assistance, are likewise a handicap even when lack of knowledge of the existence of credit sources does not play an important part.

Through the emergency crop loans the cost of ordinary commercial credit to Negro farmers has been reduced from 12 to 40 per cent, and there has been the advantage of impersonal advice on crop production. In the judgment of county agents in close touch with these farmers these crop loans have been the major sources of credit—and the most satisfactory. If, as it is contemplated, the services will

² Study of Negro Tenants, in preparation, Department of Social Science, Fisk University. *The Negro Agricultural Worker Under the Federal Rehabilitation Program (The Negro Farmer: Marginal Man in Agricultural Maladjustment—Landlord-Tenant Relations in the South)*, by Rupert B. Vance. Manuscript.

eventually be replaced by the production credit associations, there is uncertainty ahead for the small Negro farmer.

Under the Public Works Administration several wings of the service reached the Negroes. The public works projects have employed large numbers of unskilled workers, both white and Negro. The housing program, when joined to the highly desirable slum clearance program, met squarely and unavoidably an old problem of Negro residence areas in cities North and South. The very first of the projects for which ground was broken by the Administration was a Negro project in Atlanta, in the shadow of Atlanta University. Other such developments are under way or planned in Nashville, New Orleans, Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland, and hoped for in several other cities.

The Tennessee Valley Authority has been one of the most important single programs projected in the recovery effort. In this area which comprises most of Tennessee and parts of six other states, are 268,048 Negroes, or 10.2 per cent of the total population. The social planning experiment, which accompanies the vast engineering project, gives to it extraordinary significance. At Norris Dam, one of the first major developments, Negroes were included in the work, chiefly unskilled, to the extent of their proportion in the population of the area from which workers generally were drawn. Objection was raised in some quarters to their sharing the model community of Norris. In the vicinity of Wheeler and Pickwick Landing dams, however, where their population proportion of the area is 20.0 per cent, they have constituted as much as 30 per cent of the workers. The number of skilled workers, at first small, has been increasing, and the personnel program, under an exceptionally well-trained Negro, is regarded as one of the most outstanding in the entire program. There has been Negro representation in the social researches basic to the planning of programs for the area.

The Civilian Conservation Corps began with an injunction against discrimination. However, many of the state quotas were nearly completed before the Negroes were fully aware of this service. Some Negroes are in mixed camps, but in small numbers, in the northern states. In the border and southern states and in some of the northern states, the camps are separate. In September, 1934, there were 17,071 Negroes in all CCC camps.

The Civil Works Administration in northern and southern areas has been a source of emergency employment for Negroes under the classification of unskilled work. The complaints, most often justifiable, have deplored the neglect of Negro skilled and clerical workers. There is a pronounced objection in the cities of the South to the use of Negroes in skilled positions. In the selection of CWA projects little attempt is evident to convert the service to projects beneficial to Negro communities or institutions. The Subsistence Homestead Division has had Negro personnel on its general staff, and has seriously studied the possibilities of Negro developments. Boggled for months in the segregation issue, it finally settled on three sites in the South.

It is too short a period, since 1929, for the usual indexes of social change to register. Mortality, literacy, morbidity, and crime statistics, even if fully available, would scarcely be significant yet. The impossibility of maintaining a decent living standard is implicit not only in the unemployed numbers but in the drastically reduced earnings of those partly and even wholly employed. The Director of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration announced in January that there were 21,000,000 persons on federal relief. If the 1933 Negro percentage of 18.4 persons on relief is used, there are at present 3,864,000 Negroes receiving aid from the government. It was a fact marked by social workers prior to the depression that Negroes were less than their expected quota in application for relief. The long-continued necessity for aid holds the danger of making chronic dependents of many of them.

One possible counteracting feature has been noted in the salutary effects of the standards for relief in the larger cities. This has at times been higher than the families normally sustained for themselves. The selection of food has tended to give a better balance to the diet and relieve in some measure the problem of malnutrition. The advice of relief visitors has frequently been helpful, and essential medical attention has been regarded as a part of the routine of relief.

The restriction on child labor in the National Recovery Act, although not generally enforced, nevertheless helped accelerate the Negro enrolment in elementary schools. These increases came, how-

ever, at the point of drastic retrenchments in public school expenditures by counties. Dr. N. C. Newbold, Director of the Division of Negro Education in North Carolina,³ attempted late in 1932 to learn from the 18 southern states with separate schools the extent to which they had been affected by the depression. Building operations had been stopped; salaries had been reduced in some states, for Negroes more in some, and less than whites in others; and enrolment had increased generally. The morale of the teachers universally was praised. The following year school terms were shortened and many teachers paid in scrip. In 1934 federal aid had to come more directly to the rescue of the schools, to permit the completion of a normal school year.

It has been variously noted by writers that race relations have improved under an economic distress which was common to all groups, and that manifestations of racial friction have increased through the competition for fewer jobs. Both are true, the differences in expression following generally the traditional patterns of relations, and the character of the new stresses. Professor Guy B. Johnson of the University of North Carolina⁴ notes a lessening of racial tension in his state. White business has been more conscious of the Negro consumer, with a corresponding change in the formal attitudes. Although it has been suggested that the exigencies of the depression are "driving the races together," he warns that these changes should not be taken wholly as a sign of a new day in race relations. The increase in the number and brutality of lynchings in recent years has been charged to increased economic competition. The tragic irony of the situation is the historical feud between white and black workers, so heavily charged with bitterness and contempt that it continues to confuse race with status, and wastes the energies demanded for economic reconstruction on destructive envy and combat.

This conflict has been sensed by the Communists, who have taken occasion to proselyte among the restless Negro workers, and with

³ N. C. Newbold, "The Public Education of Negroes and the Current Depression," the *Journal of Negro Education* (January, 1933), pp. 5-15.

⁴ Guy B. Johnson, "The Negro and the Depression in North Carolina," *Social Forces* (October, 1933), pp. 103-15.

some success. Making common cause they have linked their interests and philosophy with the plight of the Negro workers and have made effective demonstrations. In Chicago they have protested and physically thwarted rent evictions of Negroes. They have led militant protest groups to relief agencies and dramatized the common interests of workers, white and black. In Birmingham, Alabama, they have given great alarm to the city by their doctrines and activities. The wary Negroes have sympathized with the principles which took more notice of their plight than those of other political groups, but with a moderate amount of actual membership. Led by economic liberals chiefly, white and Negro share-croppers in northern Alabama in 1933, and in Arkansas in 1934 and 1935, have challenged the long exploitative authority of the planters. The actual number involved is small, but the boldness of this new challenge of desperation has drawn the startled attention of the rural South.

It is not unlikely that the continued accentuation of the inherent evils of the tenant system, by the sheer operation of the system itself, will eventually compel the enactment of comprehensive and drastic legislation to correct it, as a means of saving southern agriculture itself.