

The African Experience in Community Development

The Continuing Struggle in Africa and the Americas

Volume II

Second Edition

Edited by

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Kent State University



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of Fred and Marion G. Crosby, the parents of Edward W. Crosby,

and

To the memory of Walter Rodney, scholar, Pan-African patriot and activist, who devoted his life and work to the full liberation of African peoples wherever domiciled.

Section I:

Developing Community: Accommodation And Protest

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The post-emancipation years for African Americans were extremely crucial in the continuing development of their communities. While the Civil War brought freedom, freedom brought new conditions and restrictions outside of the African American community, as well as a new set of diverse strategies within the black population, that aided in the struggle for continued development. Externally, the community's brief flirtation with politics during Reconstruction convinced an already doubtful American that perhaps the emancipation of the slaves had been a mistake. While Americans overlooked Reconstruction's inherent inadequacies, African Americans, who were not involved in the formulation of Reconstruction policy, were blamed in part for its ultimate failure.

Hence, African Americans were placed on trial for several offenses. They were charged with gross inferiority (validated by physical and social scientists utilizing an "unscientific method"); their women were labeled as sexually promiscuous and generally unfit for the respect given other women in the country; and their men were charged with gross neglect of their families, while maintaining an almost beastly desire for white women and (for some strange reason) white children. Besides pseudo-scientific theories, evidence to substantiate these charges included such cartoons masquerading as historical fact as D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" (1915), which more or less gave visual sanction to what many Americans already had concluded was fact, and census reports, which when coupled with Social Darwinism, indicated, although briefly (to the dismay of many), that the African American was becoming extinct.

African people in the United States were judged by ex-slave holders in collaboration with others who were interested in American industrialization—not in the industry of the African American. That concern had become in a sort of curious way (particularly after the Compromise of 1877) an exclusively "Southern Problem." The verdict, of course, was "guilty." To insure the possibility of no other verdict, African Americans were exposed to the Ku Klux Klan, the Knights of the White Camelia, the Jayhawkers, and other terrorists, who, in short, were committed to restricting African American community development.

Internally, the black community grappled with at least two problems: First, given the nature of external oppression, how could the community best develop in its own image? Second, many African Americans felt it necessary to attack the community's negative image, which had in effect obscured those high African ideals that were present long before Blacks arrived in the New World.

Two titans emerged in this period, who, based on their diverse experiences as African Americans, addressed and became notorious for their methods of solving problems in the black community. These titans were Booker T. Washington, who was popularly known for his accommodationist tactics, and W.E.B. DuBois, who addressed the same issues, but rejected accommodation in favor of unrestricted, unmitigated protest. Washington normally shunned politics, intermingling of the races, and other forms of protest, while favoring such southern-sanctioned alternatives as economic development through farming, business, and industrial education. DuBois, on the other hand, viewed political and social equality, and liberal education as paramount, southern white considerations notwithstanding. Both individuals, however, agreed on the importance of enhancing the community's image.

DuBois and Washington, of course, were not the only African Americans who addressed themselves to the problems restricting community development. Yet, their philosophies represent wide umbrellas under which other actions can be conveniently categorized. For example, when individuals like "Pap" Singleton, Chief Alfred Sam, Marcus Garvey (and even Elijah Muhammed) advocated programs of emigration (either from the South to points north, west, or out of the country), they were not responding to an accommodationist alternative (one sanctioned by the most powerful white Southerners and Northerners), but an extreme form of protest (an alternative unsanctioned by powerful white support). Other individuals who responded but were more in line with traditional interpretations of the two concepts were William Monroe Trotter, T. Thomas Fortune, Ida Wells Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, Maggie Walker and Kelly Miller.

The masses of African Americans, however, blended both accommodation and protest as effective tools in community development and maintenance. For example, when some blacks workers organized into independent unions to meet the economic needs of the community, it reflected accommodationist philosophy which permitted economic development; yet it was protest, since most white Southerners and Northerners in positions of power frowned upon both African American and white labor organizing. Consequently, both black leaders and the masses found it necessary to exercise several methods in implementing their goals. Conditions facing black people in post-emancipation America, as well as the available alternatives open to them, prohibited a consensus on the methods of continuing development. Nevertheless, one thing remained consistently clear: Methods of attainment notwithstanding, African Americans insisted on developing and maintaining their communities in their own image in spite of institutionalized and noninstitutionalized obstacles.

This section therefore begins with C. Vann Woodward's and Mary Frances Berry's descriptions of the conditions and problems that faced African Americans, and then proceeds to the community's responses to these problems with selections from William Rogers, Leroy Davis, Emma Lou Thornbrough, Lawrence Levine and Edwin Redkey. The emphasis is more on community rather than individual responses, which shows explicitly the blend of both accommodation and protest in the African American community.

Mudsills and Bottom Rails

By C. Vann Woodward

From *Origins of the New South: 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), pp. 205-34.

C. Vann Woodward, in the selection below, highlights the close relationship between black civil rights (political and social) and the economic role of Blacks in the Southern "New Order." Note how Woodward's discussion highlights the tenant, sharecropping, and penal systems, conflict between black and white workers, and the vested interests of powerful white southerners, which led ultimately to African American disfranchisement.

If reconstruction ever set the bottom rail on top, it was not for long and never securely. Redemption seemed to leave little doubt that the bottom rail was again on the bottom—whatever its temporary dislocation. It remained for the New South to find what Reconstruction had failed to find: the measure of the emancipated slave's freedom and a definition of free labor, both black and white; for the white worker's place in the New Order would be vitally conditioned by the place assigned the free black worker.

Much discussion about the Negro's civil rights, his political significance, his social status, and his aspirations can be shortened and simplified by a clear understanding of the economic status assigned him in the New Order. Emancipation and Reconstruction had done little to change that picture. The lives of the overwhelming majority of Negroes were still circumscribed by the farm and plantation. The same was true of the white people, but the Negroes, with few exceptions, were farmers without land. Questionnaires from the census of 1880 revealed that in thirty-three counties of Georgia where Negro population was thick, "not more than one in one hundred" Negro farmers owned land; the same proportion was reported from seventeen black Mississippi counties; twelve others reported not one in twenty, and many not one in fifty. From Tennessee as a whole the report was only "a very small part of the Negroes own land or even the houses in which they live;" also from Louisiana and Alabama came reports of "very few" owners.¹

More specific information is provided for one state by the report of the Comptroller General of Georgia for the year ending October 1, 1880. Of a total of some \$88,000,000 in land value, the Negroes, who made up clearly half of the state's population, owned around \$1,500,000. Of a total of some \$23,000,000 value put on cattle and farm animals, the Negroes owned about \$2,000,000 and of some \$3,200,000 in agricultural tools, the Negroes reported a little more than \$163,000.² It is pretty clear that as a rule the Negro farmer not only worked the white man's land but worked it with a white man's plow drawn by a white man's mule. In the next two decades the race's landholdings improved slightly, but in 1900 black Georgians had taxable titles to only one twenty-fifth of the land; only 14 per cent of the Negro farmers owned their farms, and in 1910 only 13 per cent.³ In the South as a whole, by 1900, 75.3 per cent of the Negro farmers were croppers or tenants.⁴

The landless Negro farmers, like the landless whites, worked either for wages or for shares, under any of several arrangements. When the Alabama planter furnished tools, animals, and feed, as well as the land, his share was one half of all crops; when he furnished only the land he took one fourth of the cotton and one third of the corn. There were numerous variations, including the "two-day system" on Edisto Island,

where the tenant worked two days of the week for the landlord in the feudal manner.⁵ The impression of uniformity in the labor system that replaced slavery would seem to have been exaggerated. As late as 1881 it was reported that in Alabama "you can hardly find any two farmers in a community who are carrying on their business alike," and frequently one planter might use several methods at once: "To one he rents, to another he gives a contract for working on shares, to another he pays wages in money, and with another he swaps work, and so *ad infinitum*." Whatever system was used "there follows the same failure, or partial failure."⁶

The share system called forth especially severe criticism from all sides as being "ruinous to the soil" and "a disgrace to farming." A large proportion of landlords preferred and used the wage system. From Tennessee in 1880 it was reported that "advocates for shares and wages are about equally divided in number." Census reports of wages paid for labor in cotton production in 1880 make no distinction between white and black workers, and there probably was little difference. Prevalent monthly wages for a man's work "from sun to sun" were \$8.00 to \$14.00 in Alabama; \$8.00 to \$15.00 in Arkansas; \$6.00 to \$10.00 in Florida; \$5.00 to \$10.00 in Georgia (\$4.00 to \$6.00 per month for women); \$6.00 to \$15.00 in Louisiana; \$8.00 to \$12.00 in Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee; \$8.00 to \$15.00 in Texas. Daily wages were usually 50 cents with room and board, or 75 cents without. A year's wages for a man in the central cotton belt of Georgia were \$60.00 to \$100.00; in Tennessee they were \$100.00 to \$125.00. Both yearly and monthly wages included rations.⁷ In 1888 it was estimated by an authority that "the regular allowance of an ordinary hand is 12 pounds of bacon and 5 pecks of meal by the month," which "would cost him twenty-three dollars in the course of twelve months."⁸

It should be noted that the year 1880, for which the wage rates are quoted, was a relatively "good" year for cotton prices. When the price fell to half that in the nineties the wages could not have been nearly so high. If a yield of only three to six bales per hand could be expected, as estimated in Arkansas in 1880, the product of a year's labor would likely bring little more than \$100.00 on the market in the middle nineties. Working on shares, the cropper at that rate received about \$50.00 for his year's work. Neither he nor his landlord was likely to see or handle any cash, since both were in all probability deeply enmeshed in the toils of the crop lien. They received instead meager supplies at the prices demanded of credit customers.

The tides of Negro migration that had set in during Reconstruction, as the first and most characteristic expression of freedom, continued to move in the same general directions for some years after Redemption. These movements were of three kinds: from the country to the towns; from the poorer lands to the delta, bottom, and richer lands; and from the older states to the newer states of the Southwest. Intermittent complaint and a few laws against "enticing" labor persisted through the eighties. With one striking exception, however, the Negro migrations were largely from one part of the South to another. The great exodus northward did not begin until a half century after freedom.⁹

A census survey of the relation of land and labor in the cotton state of Alabama in 1880 revealed that the Negroes were most thickly concentrated upon the most fertile soil in the state, and the whites, upon the poorest soil; that the most fertile land, where the sharecropping system was most prevalent, yielded the least product, and was rapidly being exhausted; that poorer lands under cultivation by owners produced greater yield per capita and per acre; and that the white farmer was rapidly gaining on the black in the proportion of the cotton produced.¹⁰

In spite of these facts, there was an almost universal preference among Black Belt landlords for Negro tenants and workers. "White labor is totally unsuited to our methods, our manners, and our accommodations," declared an Alabama planter in 1888. "No other laborer (than the Negro) of whom I have any knowledge, would be as cheerful, or so contented on four pounds of meat and a peck of meal a week, in a little log cabin 14 x 16 feet, with cracks in it large enough to afford free passage to a large sized cat."¹¹ "Give me the nigger every time," echoed a Mississippi planter. "The nigger will never 'strike' as long as you give him plenty to eat and half clothe him: He will live on less and do more hard work, when properly managed, than any other class, or race of people. As Arp truthfully says 'we can boss him' and that is what we southern folks like."¹²

The writer who estimated the cash value of freedom for the Negro thirty years after emancipation at a little less than one dollar a year to the individual¹³ overstated his point, though not so grossly as it might seem. At least such expensive luxuries as civil liberties and political franchises were beyond his reach. He knew very well that immediate, daily necessities came first—land, mules, plows, food, and clothes, all of which had to be got from a white man who oftener than not had too little himself.

In the working out of a new code of civil rights and social status for the freedman—in the definition of the Negro's "place"—Reconstruction had been only an interruption, the importance of which varied from state to state, but which was nowhere decisive. The transition from slavery to caste as a system of controlling race relations went forward gradually and tediously. Slavery had been vastly more than a labor system, and the gap that its removal left in manners, mores, and ritual of behavior could not be filled overnight. The so-called "Black Codes" were soon overthrown, as were the laws imported by the Carpetbaggers. Redemption and Hayes's policy of *laissez faire* left the code to be worked out by Southern white men. It has already been pointed out that there was no unity of opinion among them concerning the Negro's political rights. There also existed a roughly comparable division with reference to his civil rights.

Hampton, Lamar, Nicholls, and Redeemers of that type gave their solemn pledges in the Compromise of 1877 to protect the Negro in all his rights. They were probably guilty of less hypocrisy than has been charged. The class they represented had little to fear from the Negro and at the same time considerable to gain for the conservative cause by establishing themselves in a paternalistic relationship in his protector and champion against the upland and lower-class whites. This would better enable them to control his vote (against the same white element), not to mention his labor. In 1877 J.L.M. Curry listened to a debate of the Virginia Assembly in Jefferson's neoclassic capitol. "A negro member," he recorded with evident satisfaction in his diary, "said that he and his race relied for the protection of their rights & liberties, not on the 'poor white trash- but on the 'well-raised' gentlemen."¹⁴ Black-Belt white men were casual about their daily intimacy and easy personal relations with Negroes, an attitude that made upland Southerners uncomfortable and shocked Northerners, even Radical Carpetbaggers. So long as this old leadership retained strong influence, the racial code was considerably less severe than it later became.

In the early years of freedom saloons in Mississippi usually served both whites and blacks at the same bar; many public eating places, "using separate tables, served both races in the same room"; public parks and buildings were still open to both to a

great extent; and segregation in common carriers was not at all strict.¹⁵ The most common type of discrimination on railways was the exclusion of Negroes from the first-class, or “ladies” car. The races were accustomed to sharing the second-class coach. In 1877, however, a South Carolinian wrote that Negroes were “permitted to, and frequently do ride in first-class railway and street railway cars” in his state. This had caused trouble at first but was “now so common as hardly to provoke remark.”¹⁶ In 1885 George W. Cable, who was sensitive regarding discrimination, reported that in South Carolina Negroes “ride in first class cars as a right” and “their presence excites no comment,” while “In Virginia they may ride exactly as white people do and in the same cars.”¹⁷ Even the antebellum practice of using a common cemetery continued for many years. White papers occasionally “mistered” Negro politicians, if they were “good” politicians, and a Richmond paper affirmed in 1886 that “nobody here objects to sitting in political conventions with negroes. Nobody here objects to serving on juries with negroes.”¹⁸ Even the Tillman legislature of 1891 defeated a Jim Crow bill for railway cars.

From the beginning, however, concessions to the harsher cold and developing phobias of the hillbillies of the white counties had to be made. There were South Carolinians in numbers who did not share the *Charleston News and Courier's* feelings that it was “a great deal pleasanter to travel with respectable and well-behaved colored people than with unmannerly and ruffianly white men.”

It is one of the paradoxes of Southern history that political democracy for the white man and racial discrimination for the black were often products of the same dynamics. As the Negroes invaded the new mining and industrial towns of the uplands in greater numbers, and the hill-country whites were driven into more frequent and closer association with them, and as the two races were brought into rivalry for subsistence wage in the cotton fields, mines, and wharves, the lower-class white man's demand for Jim Crow laws became more insistent. It took a lot of ritual and Jim Crow to bolster the creed of white supremacy in the bosom of a white man working for a black man's wages. The Negro pretty well understood these forces, and his grasp of them was one reason for his growing alliance with the most conservative and politically reactionary class of whites against the insurgent white democracy. A North Carolina Negro wrote: “The best people of the South do not demand this separate car business . . . and, when they do, it is only to cater to those of their race, who, in order to get a big man's smile, will elevate them (*sic*) to place and power.” He believed that “this whole thing is but a pandering to the lower instincts of the worst class of whites in the South.”¹⁹

The barriers of racial discrimination mounted in direct ratio with the tide of political democracy among whites. In fact, an increase of Jim Crow laws upon the statute books of a state is almost an accurate index of the decline of the reactionary regimes of the Redeemers and triumph of white democratic movements. Take, for example, the law requiring separate accommodations for the races in trains, said to be “the most typical Southern law.” No state²⁰ enacted such a law for more than twenty years after 1865. Yet in the five years beginning in 1887 one after another adopted some variation of the law: Florida in 1887, Mississippi in 1888, Texas in 1889, Louisiana in 1890, Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky and Georgia in 1891. These were the years when the Farmers' Alliance was first making itself felt in the legislatures of these states. Mississippi, in 1888, was the first state to adopt a law providing for the separation of the races in railway stations, and Georgia, in 1891, the first to adopt the law for streetcars.²¹ These laws, though significant in themselves,