

## Analyse the different strategies advanced by American blacks to secure their advancement in the period between Reconstruction and the 1920s

The end of the Reconstructionist period saw the black population of the South - and by far the majority of American blacks lived in the former Confederacy - in a difficult situation with Constitutional rights yet with resentful state governments. The period of carpetbagger control had granted them several unprecedented rights, of which the abolition of slavery by itself radically altered the entire makeup of Southern society. Yet Woodward points out, Negroes were not overly aggressive in pressing their rights, even though they were aided by federal troops. In many ways they did not need to, since there are countless references to northerners travelling to the South in this period looking for signs of Southern recalcitrance in implementing federal race relations laws yet returning empty-handed. To some extent this was because even after the fall of Republicanism in the South, the Redeemers felt a great deal of social obligation to the blacks in the spirit of *noblesse oblige*. An example of this paternalistic strain in Redemption comes from Governor Thomas Jones of Alabama, who said 'The Negro race is under us, he is in our power. We are his custodians...we should extend to him, as far as possible, all civil rights that will fit him to be a decent and self-respecting, law-abiding and intelligent citizen...If we do not lift them up, they will drag us down.'<sup>1</sup> Conservative policy to the early 1890s was influenced as much by class feelings as by race, as can be seen from a Charleston newspaper which said in 1897 'To speak plainly, we need separate cars or apartments for rowdy or drunk whites far more than Jim Crow cars for colored passengers.'<sup>2</sup> Jim Crow legal segregation was only implemented well after the overthrow of Reconstruction in the South. In fact, it was the influence of Populism among whites which destabilised the politics of the South such as to make complete disenfranchisement and exclusion of blacks a necessary step in the eyes of many white politicians.

The Redeemers had overcome the carpetbag regimes through a mixture of appeals to public distaste at corruption, and by violence aimed at dissuading blacks from voting Republican. When Populism appeared to be successfully fusing together the not dissimilar aims of poor white and poor black farmers, Redeemers saw their struggle to retain their power as similar to that of 1877. Populist aims answered many of the needs of the black population of the South, and its support in the black community was consistently strong. Although not admitted to some Populist bodies such as the Southern Farmers Alliance, blacks joined associated ones such as Colored Farmers' National Alliance - by 1886 - this counted 1m members in 12 states.<sup>3</sup> Populism also appealed to the black electorate over the heads of their community leaders - with whom the Redeemers had working relationships - by means of pointing out a common enemy in the shape of the industrialising world. As one Populist leader said 'they are in the ditch, just like we are.' As a policy option for bettering the lot of the black community, Populism did not deliver the advances which it had been hoped, for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, the People's Party could not maintain its supporters long enough to mount a significant challenge to the hegemony of the Conservative governments of the South. Secondly, the relative tolerance and paternalism of the incumbent governments split the black vote, such that in many counties the black vote could be exploited to overcome the Populist sentiments of poor whites. Finally, the threat to the position of the Democrats lessened the credibility of the leaders who advocated a more inclusive racial policy. As John Hope Franklin puts it, 'if black rule meant chaos and disorder to the Democrats, the mere threat of it was enough for them to resort to violence themselves.'<sup>4</sup> The resulting

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<sup>1</sup> Woodward *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*

<sup>2</sup> Woodward *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*

<sup>3</sup> Franklin *From Slavery to Freedom*

<sup>4</sup> Franklin *From Slavery to Freedom*

electoral violence sanctioned by the Democratic leadership - such as Governor William Oates of Alabama who said 'Go to it boys. Count them out' - left many in both Democrat and Populist parties who were determined that the black vote should not again interfere in what they saw primarily as a white political issue. As Tom Watson said 'without the bugaboo of Negro domination...every white man would act according to his own conscience and judgement in deciding how he shall vote.'<sup>5</sup> It is not a coincidence that the harsh new franchise laws came into force in the 1890s - with 'grandfather' clauses allowing many whites to continue voting. They were designed to preserve Southern politics not from controversy but from black interference in the controversy. Admittedly there was a drop of 44% in eligible white voters, but the extreme drop in registered blacks - in Louisiana from 130,344 in 1896 to 5,320 in 1900 - shows quite how comprehensive franchise qualifications could be within the bounds of the Supreme Court's reading of the Fifteenth Amendment.<sup>6</sup> In this way, black experimentation in the political process could be seen to be contrary to his interests because of the adverse reaction this brought about from whites in electoral violence, lynchings and also by an increase in racial hostility in general.

If attempting to gain progress through the political sphere did not produce the lasting betterment which many Negroes had hoped for, then in many ways the trial of segregation did not necessarily worsen their status, since it forced black communities - which after all were now free - to rely on each other for mutual support. Foremost among the institutions which blacks used to help each other were the family, the church and the benefit society. All three were new elements in the black community, not least the family which now took on more than a merely symbolic role. Under slavery, there was no basic economic unit in the way that the family became to the freedmen. Kinship networks maintained each other especially since all members of the family worked, in what were predominantly menial conditions - men mostly as unskilled labourers or share-cropping farmers with the women taking in washing or as domestic servants. Black churches, an innovation in itself, formed a crucial role of social cohesion, being social centres and the last refuges of self-government in the face of unresponsive local governments. They also had a great role to play in the financing of black educational projects and were the basis of the black mutual societies and insurance companies which catered for a client base rejected by the white companies. Low-cost burial insurance as well as a closely-knit group of mourners in the words of Rabinowitz 'assured their members of the kind of respect in death that the larger society had denied them in life.'<sup>7</sup> The benefit societies were in the words of WEB DuBois 'next to the church...the most popular organizations among Negroes' and led directly to the increase in banks specifically created by and for the black community. In 1888 the first segregated bank was founded in Richmond, Virginia; by 1914 there were 55 specialist black banks. The creation of a specialised Negro economy was however by no means a measure of the withdrawal of white trade from black businesses - though with immigrants competing with blacks in specialised trades such as barbers this did happen - but rather was a deliberate policy on the part of many prominent black leaders. John Hope for instance said that 'the masses of Negroes must learn to patronise business enterprises conducted by their own race. We must co-operate or we are lost.'<sup>8</sup> The National Negro Business League, which was founded in 1900, counted 320 branches by 1907, which was in itself a measure of how far businesses could prosper even by the custom of blacks alone despite their relative poverty. Other areas of racial solidarity were far less successful, such as the programs to create all-black towns in the West, such as Nicomedus, Kansas and Langston, Oklahoma etc. In the South, towns such as Mount Bayou, Mississippi were deliberately created to be 'a town owned and operated by our people, where a black mayor with his black aldermen sit in the council chambers making laws, a black

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<sup>5</sup> Rabinowitz *The First New South* p.109

<sup>6</sup> Franklin *From Slavery to Freedom* p.261

<sup>7</sup> Rabinowitz *The First New South* p.152

<sup>8</sup> Franklin *From Slavery to Freedom*

ticket agent sells the tickets and the white man's waiting room is in the rear.<sup>9</sup> However, most of these projects failed since the towns in question invariably had less than 5,000 people in them, and worked in the teeth of opposition from county governments which remained firmly in the hands of disapproving whites. Indeed although throughout America small towns were being swamped with new immigrants from the countryside and abroad, most of the black towns were either in decline or were abandoned by the 1920s. Likewise attempts to propagate colonisation abroad, most notably to Liberia in Africa, failed through lack both of resources and manpower.

However, blacks continued to move to find better economic circumstances, to the growing cities of the South and also the metropolises of the North. By 1910 the changing social demography showed over 80,000 blacks in five cities - Washington, New York, New Orleans, Philadelphia and Baltimore - noticeably that only one of the five was in the former Confederacy.<sup>10</sup> Under the direction of Benjamin 'Pap' Singleton the exoduses, especially that of 1879 were sufficient to justify a Congressional inquiry. When speaking to them, Singleton gave the reason that 'when the white man will think that equal rights...is a violation of his ...dignity, then I am going to leave.'<sup>11</sup> There were a great variety of 'push' and 'pull' factors at work, yet the largest numbers of blacks who moved in this period moved neither to the cities nor to the north, but instead mainly to the south-west and the states on the Gulf of Mexico. Even as late as 1900, 90% of blacks still lived in the South of which 80% lived in the countryside.<sup>12</sup> It was only with the outbreak of the First World War that the demographic shifts changed again, such that in the years 1914-20 approx. 600,000 blacks moved North, especially the section WEB DuBois described as the 'Talented Tenth'.<sup>13</sup> On arrival in the north, we must not presume that blacks escaped from the problems of racial discrimination: although they may have been able to ride in the same street-cars as white, they soon formed ghettos such as Harlem in New York and were excluded from many of the vital levers of work such as trade unions. As a consequence, the numbers of urban blacks unemployed was substantially higher than of any other immigrant group, including those less qualified than themselves, and blacks formed a large pool of strike-breaking labour, which only increased the hatred felt towards them by the various white groups. However the principle of emigration was accepted far more in the north, where the *Chicago Defender* felt able to ask 'Do you wonder at the thousands, leaving the land where every foot of ground marks a tragedy, leaving the graves of their fathers and all that is dear, to seek their fortunes in the North?'<sup>14</sup>

The reaction to seeing growing numbers of people heading north provided just one example of the many issues separating the two most influential black leaders after the death of Douglass - Booker T Washington and WEB DuBois. Thus Washington spoke 'to those of my race who depend upon bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man...I would say "cast down your bucket where you are"',<sup>15</sup> while DuBois recognised that the 'Talented Tenth' had moved away due to the continuing racism which had led the editor of the *Fisk Herald* to say in 1889 'We are not the Negro from whom the chains of slavery fell a quarter of a century ago...we are now qualified, and being the equal of whites, should be treated as such.'<sup>16</sup> However, the most glaring clash between them was on the place of education in Negro life as well as the Negro's role in a larger society. Of the two, Washington was certainly the possessor of more power, due to the fact that his vision of blacks - as having to concentrate on creating their own material prosperity by being

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<sup>9</sup> Rabinowitz *The First New South* p.143

<sup>10</sup> Jones *The Limits of Liberty*

<sup>11</sup> Meier *Negro Thought in America* p.60

<sup>12</sup> Rabinowitz *The First New South* p.148

<sup>13</sup> Rabinowitz *The First New South* p.156

<sup>14</sup> Rabinowitz *The First New South* p.156

<sup>15</sup> Franklin *From Slavery to Freedom* p.271

<sup>16</sup> Rabinowitz *The First New South* p.145

useful to the rest of the world - found favour with both northerners and indeed Southern whites. Essentially it was a view of cultural pluralism in which blacks acted in the manner of other immigrant communities in maintaining their own separate social institutions while acting in the same economic world. Thus he said that 'the education of my people should be directed...upon the everyday practical things of life...something which they will be permitted to do in the community in which they reside.'<sup>17</sup> To this end the Tuskegee Institute offered 'industrial education' such as agriculture, mechanics etc. which was more acceptable to white industrialists than the more classical syllabuses of many Northern educational foundations. Indeed the Peabody fund specifically allocated its money 'for the promotion & encouragement of intellectual, moral or industrial education among the young people of the more destitute portions of the Southern and south-western states'<sup>18</sup> Haygood said to the Slater Fund in 1886 that 'There is more kindly feeling among Southern white people toward these schools than heretofore.'<sup>19</sup> These colleges, such as Tuskegee and Hampton, obtained staggering sums of money from Northern philanthropists with the Peabody Fund alone spending \$3.5m between 1867 and 1914 and Rockefeller donating \$53m to the General Education Board in 1903. Yet the crucial aspect of the great new emphasis on 'industrial education' was the principle of self-help, and in the words of Washington 'We are trying to instil into the Negro mind that if education does not make the Negro humble, simple and of service to the community then it will not be encouraged.'<sup>20</sup> Many philanthropists did see that a trained yet non-unionised labour-force would be needed for the planned industrialisation of the New South. However, the major failing of Washington's self-help educational thesis was that he accepted *laissez-faire* ideology without realising that the process of industrialisation was changing long-held economic truths. Thus when he urged blacks to become blacksmiths and artisans, it was at the very moment when industrialism was phasing these jobs out. His directive to them to 'cast down your bucket where you are' and remain in the rural South, constrained many in the least dynamic part of the US economy as well as the most hostile to black presence.

What Washington appeared to condone was however the segregation which Jim Crow had brought with it, such as his speech in Atlanta in 1895 in which he said 'In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.' Although his private financing of anti-segregation law-suits said the opposite, the Tuskegee leadership achieved little to bring about the equality before the law which Reconstruction had set out to create. In some ways this was deliberate - with Washington believing that blacks were not yet ready for equal status - but in other ways it accepted much of the status quo. It was not merely Booker T Washington, however, who concentrated more on ensuring equality rather than seeking to remove segregation: it was in fact most blacks, such as the councillor in Montgomery, Alabama who simply tried to have the black section of the cemetery properly maintained, rather than demanding desegregation. It was only with greater black involvement in northern society through emigration, the advent of the NAACP in the 1920s and more liberal judgements from the Supreme Court and northern politics in general that segregation could again come into the spotlight. The credit for that must to some degree be given to Washington, who by his leadership had removed from the Negro question the stigma of Reconstruction.

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<sup>17</sup> Franklin *From Slavery to Freedom* p.272

<sup>18</sup> Franklin *From Slavery to Freedom* p.265

<sup>19</sup> Meier *Negro Thought in America*

<sup>20</sup> Woodward *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*