
THE IMPACT OF SLAVERY ON 20TH-AND 21ST-CENTURY BLACK PROGRESS

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THE IMPACT OF SLAVERY ON 20TH- AND 21ST-CENTURY BLACK PROGRESS

Ronald W. Walters



Dr. Ronald W. Walters. Courtesy of the African American Studies Program, and the Government and Politics Department, University of Maryland, College Park.

One of the most persistent, yet devastating myths is that slavery ended in 1865—persistent because it is so pervasive in the current of United States history and devastating because it establishes a benchmark from which African American

The late Ronald W. Walters was Distinguished Leadership Scholar, Director of the African Leadership Program, and Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland, College Park. The JAAH is planning an upcoming symposium on the scholarly contributions and political activism of Dr. Ronald W. Walters.

progress is supposedly made. Therefore, it is useful to summarize the meaning of the linkages of slavery to the socioeconomic condition of African Americans in poverty in the 20th and 21st centuries. Historian Pete Daniel researched files in the National Archives to uncover the historical reality of black re-enslavement in the 20th century in his work *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901–1969*, and in doing so, he was one of the first to shatter the myth of slavery’s end in 1865 and the confusion caused by the successive terminologies such as “sharecropping,” “convict-lease system,” “peonage,” and other labor systems that have been used to cover up an historical truth. But until recently, even his research invited little follow-up by other scholars.¹

Gregory Freeman, one of the few scholars who has taken up this subject, offered a bold conclusion in the introduction to *Lay This Burden Down* on the practice of debt peonage:

[W]ithin all the history, there is a lie. The lie, told to southerners and everyone else, is that slavery disappeared after Appomattox. It did not. Slavery existed well into the twentieth century in America, in the form of peonage, whereby blacks were fined for vagrancy or other supposed crimes and then forced to work off the debt on local farms for what often became a lifetime of brutal conditions. For those trapped in peonage, the technical distinction between themselves and the slaves of a previous generation was meaningless.²

Even as the specific condition of slavery faded for many, its relevance to the American industrial revolution prompted the re-enslavement of millions of African Americans in various forms by the turn of the 20th century. Douglas Blackmon in his Pulitzer Prize winning study of the convict-lease system *Slavery by Another Name* begins in the late 19th century and poses the hypothetical question asked by many, both African Americans and whites: “If it is not racial inferiority, what explained the inexplicably labored advance of African Americans in U.S. society in the century between the Civil War and the civil rights movement of the 1960s?”³ He goes on to answer that question: “For many Black readers, the account of how a form of American slavery persisted into the twentieth century, embraced by the U.S. economic system and abided at all levels of government, offered a concrete answer to that [question] for the first time.”⁴

Indeed, one of the striking things about the character of the modern discourse about the reason for the persistence of overt and covert racism and the way in which it affects various aspects of American life is that it appears de-linked from the past history of the United States as a slave society. Although slavery is an institution that dominated American race relations for 250 years and persisted in various forms and intensity for another one hundred years after it was declared illegal, it is rarely discussed by social scientists as the foundation for modern racial

dynamics such as the socioeconomic conditions for African Americans and the racial attitudes of white Americans. Nevertheless, the realm and reach of its proximity to modern problems should still inform the work of scholars today. However, the unarticulated impact of slavery has fostered in whites and many African Americans alike the notion that in the 21st century, African Americans themselves are totally responsible for having created and maintained the situation in which they find themselves.

Few scholars have gone to the lengths of sociologist Joe Feagin, however, to subscribe to the notion that the framework which slavery created constitutes a model depository for the features of “internal colonialism,” a concept that Robert Blauner popularized beginning in the 1970s.⁵ Feagin asserts that the essential paradigm of social control persisted into the 20th century, mentioning new forms of slavery such as peonage, and cites Booker T. Washington as describing the conditions on the plantation as “a kind of slavery that is in one sense as bad as the slavery of antebellum days.”⁶ The items that constituted the pillars of this paradigm in what he called the “badges and disabilities of slavery” consisted of:

- (1) restrictions on Black voting [exist] in many areas of the South;
- (2) most Black children still attend segregated schools;
- (3) most Black families live in segregated residential areas;
- (4) most Blacks seeking housing face informal discrimination by real estate people, landlords, and homeowners;
- (5) most Blacks are tried by all-white juries from which Blacks have been excluded during the selection process;
- (6) most Blacks face covert and subtle, if not blatant, discrimination in the job market, including promotion barriers.⁷

One might have extended this list to include factors such as the over-policing and criminalization of African Americans, the denial of resources from the federal government to support black public schools and neighborhoods, and other phenomena. However, he went on to discuss lack of fair employment, segregated education, discrimination in housing, disenfranchisement in voting, and violence as persistent badges as well. These factors constitute the “badges and disabilities of slavery, and the foundation of difficulties that it laid for the attempt of African Americans to achieve equality with white Americans.” At the same time, whites enjoyed a monumental head start as slaveholders and the creators of a society built on the wealth the enslaved workers produced. Thus, whites were the arbiters of African Americans’ entrance into that society.

As suggested at the outset of this study, the de-linking of modern conditions with slavery has continued apace, even within serious attempts to analyze these problems by African Americans themselves. For instance, in 1983 the Joint Center

for Political and Economic Studies, an African American think tank, produced a concept paper, “A Policy Framework for Racial Justice.”⁸ The researchers argued that while African Americans have always been structurally excluded from the mainstream U.S. economy, they suffered in the early 1980s from problems that had little to do with race such as deindustrialization, shifting patterns of employment, and changing central city demographics. Even if we agree with this concept in practicality, the basic question is: Why have African Americans suffered from these phenomena more than other groups? The fact is that the dynamics of all of these elements have taken race into account and produced racist results in that they exhibit racial history, white supremacist motivations, and the resulting social inequalities.

It is possible that such analyses assume that slavery is an unarticulated aspect in every equation devised to explain the progress, or lack of black progress, compared with whites. By not openly acknowledging the impact of slavery, the de-linking effect mystifies the causes of black disabilities as present phenomena, not as linked to a historic system of legalized oppression. Joe Feagin referred to a report by black economist and former Federal Reserve Board member, Andrew Brimmer, who found that between 1960 and 1975 the occupational center of gravity for African Americans remained anchored in those positions requiring little skill and offering few opportunities for advancement.⁹ Moreover, Brimmer went on to cite a study by a Washington, DC-based liberal think tank, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, which found that African Americans were “falling behind.”¹⁰ The issue for us is whether there is a linkage between this situation and the existence of 20th-century slavery, or whether the comparatively lower socioeconomic status of African Americans is conceived as a “normal” baseline requiring no interrogation.

References by many scholars to the practice of slavery as an “institution” infers that it included a veritable baggage of practices and attitudes that were employed by slave owners to accomplish their goals. Since the strength of these elements was necessary to maintain the institution, a relevant question to ask is: How would these elements have disappeared over such short a time, either from the formal end of slavery, or its actual ending in the 20th century? Thus, for many African Americans the description of the extension of slavery well into the 20th century should close the gap between their confinement and ill treatment in slavery and the extent to which they were prepared to accept and utilize the opportunities that are being made available. It should also provide the relevant content by which scholars might reconnect the origins of racism to its foundation. For, as I suggested in my book *The Price of Racial Reconciliation*, many feel that the society has arrived at a view that suggests there are no modern victims of slavery.¹¹ In

a memory blockage paradigm, we locate slavery in the 19th century, rejecting the existence of a modern lineage of perpetrators and victims.

To be sure, the United States is a special case to the extent that it was able to exploit the unpaid labor of people of African descent to achieve leadership in the industrial world. The racial dichotomy utilized by governmental agencies to distribute the economic benefits to the social sector guaranteed that race and the lowest income class would be synonymous. The sheer dynamism of the economic process and its distribution to whites formed a racial rift among American citizens; the end result is to pose the question in a mystical way of why African Americans have not progressed as much in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Instead of generally accepting black subordination through many devices, including the extension of slavery and forced labor, questions have been revived about the humanity, the intelligence, and the industriousness of African Americans.

Nevertheless, I agree with Joe Feagin and Douglas Blackmon that the extension of slavery is one of those factors that worked to limit the progress of many African Americans in American society. Having briefly described the extension of slavery, I will make some comments on its relationship to African Americans' resulting socioeconomic status.

THE CRIMINALIZATION AND EXPLOITATION OF THE BLACK POPULATION

As noted above, one of the most important ways black southerners were kept in conditions of peonage and poverty was through their criminalization. Laws passed by southern legislatures after the Civil War allowed the arrest, detention, and transfer of prisoners into forced labor as payment to the state for the alleged violation of law. Once released from slavery in 1865, or from the newer forms of slavery thereafter, the efforts of African Americans to become economically secure took priority. This individual and collective initiative played into their criminalization. While many of the peonage-related laws involved infractions such as vagrancy and fraud, many other named minor offenses were collectively utilized to prey on black southerners who needed money to survive. Their survival strategies became a new source of criminalization, whether they were fairly convicted or not.

A review of the convictions against African Americans serving time in the Atlanta City Jail for the period 1902–1920 revealed the following pattern of offenses committed:

**Table 1. “Offenses by African Americans
Serving in the Atlanta Jail, 1902–1920”**

Offense	Number
Stealing	45
Violating postal laws	38
Violating interstate commerce laws	25
Assault w/dangerous weapon	23
Forgery	20
Illicit distilling	17
Robbery	15
Violating internal revenue laws	13
Embezzling money	13
Manslaughter	12

Source: A selected sample, drawn from the letter “C” of the last name of inmates in the Atlanta Jail, 1902–1920. U.S. National Archives, Washington, DC.

It is readily apparent that crimes involving money are paramount in this pattern of offenses, which would be logical for a group that had emerged from slavery and was under pressure to survive in a country that was fast leading the world in industrial and commercial development.

While at Atlanta University at the turn of the 20th century, W. E. B. Du Bois was contracted by the U.S. Department of Labor to conduct studies on the life and conditions of black southerners, a project which involved white scholars as well. The results of those studies were included in his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), where he asserted even more forcefully that black degradation had grown out of slavery with its system of “unrequited toil” and through low wage labor on Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi plantations. Du Bois noted that in Louisiana when black plantation workers tried to strike to improve their conditions, the strike was “brutally smashed.”¹² The point is made by both Du Bois and Richard Robert Wright, Jr., who had studied African Americans in the northern community of Xenia, Ohio. Both rejected the negative stereotypes by suggesting that in Xenia and in Farmville, Virginia, African Americans had expressed a particular hopefulness in their situation and in the future. This hopeful quality was important as the underpinnings of their strivings and advancement activities.¹³

The conditions reported in Farmville and Xenia were part of a shared legacy

of African Americans in many small towns as late as the 1960s. Research by sociologists Walter R. Allen and Reynolds Farley provided a linkage for understanding the economic status of African Americans from the 1940s to the mid-1980s.¹⁴ They found a major demographic difference among African Americans, sufficient to consider that there were “two competing realities in the black community.” They reported, “At one extreme is an emerging black elite. At the other is a black underclass mired in poverty and possibly at risk of permanent exclusion from full participation in the society.”¹⁵ My research has largely been concerned with the latter group, agreeing with Allen and Farley who identified the major elements in the foundation for poverty: “Under the enduring influences of the plantation economy, rural southern Blacks were characterized by extreme cultural isolation, high rates of illiteracy, low social mobility, and limited opportunities for schooling. Due to the twin historical forces of economic and racial subjugation, the life circumstances and life chances of Blacks . . . were greatly restricted.”¹⁶

Allen and Farley suggested that these “two countervailing trends” continued. They were disclosed again in the recent research by sociologist William Julius Wilson, who observed that African Americans with poor job skills, lack of education, high rates of unemployment, and a reliance on welfare benefits were the victims of structural changes in the labor force that had eliminated many jobs in the industrial sector.¹⁷ For example, in 1940, 40 percent of all black males worked in agriculture as “farmers, farm managers and farm laborers”; over the next four decades the proportion had fallen to 1.0 percent with the greatest declines occurring between 1950 and 1960. Meanwhile, in the same period (1940–1980) black employment grew in the smaller categories of managers (89 percent), proprietors and officials (85 percent) and clerical (87 percent); and in the larger employment categories such as craftsmen (75 percent) and operatives (57 percent).¹⁸

But in the period between the turn of the 20th century and the 1940s, the economic resources such as wages and land that should have accrued to African Americans from participation in the new labor systems did not contribute to the alleviation of their impoverished status. In a work that delves directly into *The Roots of Black Poverty*, Jay Mandle found that those who were involved in the sharecropping system were paid minimal amounts for their crop and a significant percentage ended the year in debt due to the perverse functioning of the system. Mandle found that normally black sharecroppers or tenant farmers were unable to obtain loans from the usual sources such as banks so a lien was placed on their crops by the landowners and merchants. This meant sharecroppers and tenants were forced to secure up-front loans from the owners to participate in the agricultural system with the expectation that the loans would be repaid at the end of the

growing season. However, Mandle went on to describe the improbability of repayment.

Repayment of the loan occurred at the time the crop was sold. According to the 1926 survey of plantations in North Carolina, 82 percent of croppers received cash advances from planters; the average interest charges on these advances was 21 percent. In addition, 60 percent of the croppers received household supplies through the extension of credit; the interest charge on these goods was 53 percent. Where plantation stores were not present, tenants gained access to household supplies from merchants on the landlords' guarantee; this was the most expensive form of credit with an average annual interest charge of 71 percent.¹⁹

RACE AND POVERTY

Walter R. Allen and Reynolds Farley suggested that race has played an influential role in the modern economic inequalities for African Americans. The purely economic motivation and the use of enslaved black labor determined the "system's origin, definitions and justification as being instrumental in agricultural, industrial, and economic capacities."²⁰ Here, they address the differential futures Du Bois found in his Farmville, Virginia, study that have relevance to the late 20th century scholarly debate around the origin and maintenance of the so-called "black underclass." Allen and Farley concluded that not only were changes in the nature of the U.S. economy culpable, but the existence of "intergenerational poverty," chronic unemployment, and lack of real economic opportunities were also causal factors.²¹

Intergenerational poverty was transferred and carried like invisible baggage from place to place. As African Americans were forced into ghettoized communities in the South and the North, poverty became a dominant feature. Black communities in southern cities were impoverished due to the high slave-origin proportion of the population. In Alabama, for example, Montgomery was 48 percent black in 1840; Mobile—48.4 percent in 1830; Huntsville—47.6 percent in 1850; New Orleans 63 percent black in 1810; Augusta, Georgia—47 percent black in 1800, and the vast majority of African Americans were enslaved.²² However, the inter-regional black migration was significant between 1900 and 1940 averaging a 9.3 percent increase in the seven northern cities of New York, Newark, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, Cleveland, and Columbus, Ohio. These were relatively low proportions compared with the migration between 1950 and 1990 that averaged an increase of 27.2 percent of African Americans in these cities, and pushing Newark, Detroit, Washington, DC, and others above the 50 percent mark, with many other cities close behind.²³

The rapidity with which the "Second Great Migration" materialized and the

large numbers meant that poverty continued due to the lack of human resources and the oppressive and exploitative labor conditions in the early 20th century. Throughout that era 80 percent of black males and 95 percent of black females lived below the poverty line in 1930, and 60 percent of African Americans were impoverished in 1959.²⁴

As the large migration of African Americans to the northern cities was occurring, little was done to secure an economic base for the black population and facilitate entry into the social and political arena. In the late 1960s Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed this issue as he took on the task of launching a new movement against poverty.

Most of the largest cities are victims of the large migration of Negroes. Although it was well known that millions of Negroes would be forced off the land in the South by the contraction of agricultural employment during the past two decades, no national planning was done to provide remedies. When white immigrants arrived in the United States in the late nineteenth century, a beneficent government gave them free land and credit to build a useful, independent lives. In contrast, when the Negro migrated, he was left to his own resources. Though other minorities had encountered obstacles, none was so brutally scorned, or so consistently denied opportunity and hope, as was the Negro.²⁵

THE SOCIAL POLICY EFFECT

As a result of the conceptual de-linking of slavery from the foundation of black poverty by scholars and other observers of U.S. social policy affecting African Americans in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, most Americans appear to have lost all understanding of the origins of the social and economic disparities between whites and African Americans in U.S. society. Sociologist Jill Quadagno powerfully explicated the role of racism in the development of Franklin D. Roosevelt's social welfare system that clearly privileged the white poor, a system that was still in place through Lyndon Johnson's administration.²⁶ Indeed, so stark were the limitations on African Americans' ability to gain access to the benefits intended by the new welfare system, that sociologist Deborah E. Ward concluded that it was a "White Welfare State." Ward's statistical regressions on the spread of welfare benefits between 1911 and 1925 into most states, beginning with programs of "Mother's Pensions," led her to conclude, "The permissiveness of the state legislation resulted in the intrusive and arbitrary monitoring of recipients, nonstandardized grants, arbitrary determination of eligibility, and the exclusion of poor African-American mothers who were not considered suitable by local standards."²⁷

The Franklin Roosevelt era established the framework for future social policy and the "safety net" that was supposed to protect U.S. citizens from poverty and

desperation. But essentially, the slavery, semi-slavery, and poverty experienced by most African Americans were cast in concrete, and they were excluded from the benefits of the social welfare system, and what political scientist Linda Williams has called “social citizenship.”²⁸ This caste-like status promoted a dependent population that was available for low-wage labor. Williams pointed out that in 1939, 80 percent of the black population resided in the South and had less than \$1,000 per year in income.

Table 2. Percent of Blacks in the South Receiving Less Than \$1,000 Per Year

South Atlantic	92.5
East South Central	94.5
West South Central	95.4

Source: Excerpted from Table 2.2, Linda Faye Williams, *The Constraint of Race* (State College, PA, 2003), 85.

Williams paints a devastating picture of the effects of the exclusion of African Americans from New Deal agricultural and relief programs due to the power of southern white politicians and pressure of the “planter establishment.” Williams reported a statement by an official of the Tennessee Valley Authority, indicating that the objective was to keep farm workers alive on pork and meal in the slack season, “so that these niggers would be good and hungry” in the planting season.²⁹ She found that while seven in ten whites were included in the “Old Age Insurance Program,” six of ten black workers were excluded.³⁰ In addition, the Social Security Act of 1935 created Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) which in many states contained a “morals” test with “suitable home” and “illegitimate” child qualifications that limited African Americans’ participation.³¹ Williams concluded that “given the power to control [welfare] assistance, the South did what it wanted, and what it wanted was to manipulate federal funds in a way to maintain its cheap labor force. Cash grants to African Americans were monitored so as not to undermine prevailing wage rates and to intrude as little as possible into the sharecropper system.”³² Williams argued that through these means the political economy of the plantation areas became aligned with the programs emerging from the social welfare system, enlisting the federal government in the maintenance of low-wage labor.

The discussion on the origins of the underclass has featured prominently in the research of William J. Wilson, and he, like many scholars, gives more weight to the changes in the nature of the U.S. economy than to the economic structures and

practices inherited from slavery. Yet, the main influence that made the development of social welfare policy necessary as a government initiative in the 1960s was the Civil Rights Movement. Civil rights activists raised these issues to the nation, and when President Lyndon Johnson responded, it was clear that he had to address the legacy of the past—forces that were powerful influences in creating and maintaining the economic inequality between black and white households. However, the principal question was: Could the momentum created by the “War on Poverty” focused on *compensatory programs* be sustained?

As Joe Feagin has observed, there existed a difference between liberal principles and positive action between 1960s and the mid-1970s. By 1978 only 36–39 percent of whites supported government intervention to guarantee fair treatment of African Americans in the acquisition of employment.³³ Likewise, he found that the proportion of whites favoring school integration dropped from 42 percent in 1964 to only 25 percent by 1978.³⁴

White attitudes are important because substantial research has revealed that public opinion has a powerful impact on the shaping of public policy. As the media participates in the delivery of information, it influences both those views and the eventual issues around which policy is structured. The opinions expressed above are troublesome because they are contradictory to what some analysts believe are the major elements that determine black economic progress. For example, two researchers writing in the *American Economic Review* found that in the 1970s, “the slowdown in black economic progress was not due to a well argued factor . . . a cessation of the long-run trends of improving black labor market skills and wages, [which] turned out not to be plausible.”³⁵ Rather they found that “three events [had] started to blunt the translation of the [then] still-improving black labor market skills into a higher standard of living for Black America: The accelerating breakup of the black family, rising rates of black unemployment, and a slowdown in American economic growth.”³⁶

Such a view is important because it helps to clarify those factors related to black progress that are in the control of African Americans themselves, and those factors beyond their control. Many politicians argued in the 1980s that the African American community was beyond the need for special remedial public policy and that its forward progress resided in the extent to which African Americans could marshal the individual human capital to move into the U.S. labor force. The early work of sociologist Glen Loury exemplified this attitude, arguing that “the bottom stratum of the black community has compelling problems that can no longer be blamed solely on white racism, that will not yield to protest marches or court orders, and that force us to confront fundamental failures in lower-class black urban society.”³⁷ However, what Loury’s view misses is the complexity of black economic progress. While agreeing that individual preparation is central, even

with such preparation African Americans have found it difficult to become upwardly mobile. Views similar to Loury’s are disseminated widely in the media, and even in a 2007 book by Bill Cosby.³⁸

THE NEW NORMAL IN RACE RELATIONS

Although college enrollment for African Americans in 2000 had doubled to nearly 2 million students since the 1980s, more recently progress of the black middle class has stagnated. The less advantaged, lower-income sector has begun to expand under the pressures from unfavorable economic factors. While it is accurate to say that more African Americans are able to marry, to pursue an education, and to avoid being incarcerated, in the early 21st century, formidable challenges remain such as external competitive forces, globalization and the flight of jobs overseas, competition for low-wage labor due to immigration, and the economic neglect of black neighborhoods following the recent housing debacle. These problems require massive assistance beyond the African American community, yet the economic policies pursued by decision makers fail to address this reality.

Public opinion polling has consistently revealed that whites have a much different view of the causes of black disparities and their severity. The data below were gathered asking whether African Americans “almost always or frequently experience racism” in certain situations.

Table 3. Percent of Black and White Response to Racism in Certain Situations, 2007

Situation	Black	White
Apply for job	67	20
Rent apartment or house	65	27
Apply to college or university	43	7
Eat in restaurant or shop in stores	50	12

Source: Author’s creation from data in the study, “Optimism about Black Progress Declines: Blacks See Growing Values Gap Between Poor and Middle Class,” in Pew Research Center, *A Social & Demographic Trends Report* (Washington, DC, November 2007), 30.

First, we must assert that the experience with racial discrimination that is reported by African Americans constitutes the most credible response to this question. The views of whites, who have far less intimate knowledge about or experience with racial discrimination, constitute opinions based upon limited informa-

tion, and are far less credible. Second, a substantial disconnect between the reported views of black and white Americans on the existence of racial discrimination is a phenomenon that shapes relative social access and the power differential between the two groups.

While there is no one source of whites' perceptions and opinions, I theorize that a dominant reason is the lack of knowledge about the oppressive historical conditions African Americans faced and how long they persisted. Moreover, there is the companion myth that the efforts of government programs to address the disadvantages suffered by African Americans were sufficient to ameliorate the problems. And then, there is the ideological view, often informed by pre-existing racial animus, that regardless of the existing conditions, adequate social resources have been expended on the social problems African Americans face.

These views have produced a debate, not only on how to explain the causes of continuing disparities, but also on how to arrive at solutions. The greatest and most frequent of the myths is that African Americans have been "free" from the condition of slavery for over a century and a half, and therefore should be able to fend for themselves, just like whites and immigrants. This is based on the historical disconnect between current poverty rates in the African American community and their roots in the practice of racial slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Historians have contributed to this myth by failing to carry the story of slavery forward into the 20th century. They have failed to emphasize that even while the Civil Rights Movement was in full force, in parts of the South, African Americans were still held in oppressive, slave-like conditions as rigid as those of the previous centuries. Yet, conservative ideologues and pundits have been allowed to mystify the reasons for the lack of black progress, and argue that the causes of black economic disadvantages have been created by African Americans themselves.

Polls also reveal that many African Americans are in agreement with this conservative perspective. Thus, while 71 percent of whites believe that African Americans are responsible for their own condition, 53 percent of the black respondents believe it as well.³⁹ While there is a nearly 20 percent difference in black and white views, the finding that many African Americans believe that they are responsible for their own condition requires much more analysis. For example, it is not clear whether African Americans base their view on a lack of knowledge of historical circumstances; or they are expressing the well-known "Horatio-Alger" myth of "rugged individualism"; or they reject government assistance as the route to their—and to other African Americans'—independence and advancement in American society. Nevertheless, the lack of knowledge about past events, critical to their evaluation of the current conditions, exists among African Americans as well.

THE PERSISTENT EFFECT OF SOUTHERN CULTURAL VALUES

For Americans to acquire more cosmopolitan attitudes and values that support social justice for all, free of a racial animus, would require change in the interpretations and understanding of U.S. history and dominant cultural values. In an analysis of the seventy-five years following Reconstruction, W. E. B. Du Bois alluded to the impact that it had on the South in these words: "The attempt to suppress the Negro since 1876, to push him back toward slavery, to make him a social caste and to keep him in poverty, has had an extraordinary effect upon the South."⁴⁰ Also, in his study of Reconstruction, Du Bois suggested that the oppression of African Americans produced an astonishing distortion in the value system of the white southerner.

His actions must contradict his religion, his political life must go contrary to the democratic framework, his natural sympathy must be curtailed and distorted by artificial race hatred; and his whole sense of justice and right must be twisted into keeping Negroes poor, ignorant, and sick and whatever of his program he shrinks from doing himself, he stops his ears and blinds his eyes and turns over to the worst elements of the white community while he sits dumb.⁴¹

The southern region as the repository of these anti-black values has become the Achilles heel of black progress, leading much of the nation in attitudes opposing black progress. For example, African Americans were poised in southern cities where they were a high proportion of the population to participate in politics, yet it was in the interest of whites to prevent them from using their political power. While the proportion of African Americans remained relatively constant at 40 percent of the total population, or declined in the larger southern cities of Atlanta, New Orleans, Jackson, Charlotte, and Richmond, only in the 1970s and 1980s did the logjams break to allow majority black cities to elect black public officials.

Pressure was often applied to prevent African Americans from assuming control of political jurisdictions in southern cities, counties, and states with significant black populations. This project has continued into the 21st century, using a mixture of the older tactics of voter intimidation, manipulation, gerrymandering, and the creation of new requirements to vote. Legislation was eventually passed in many states requiring the presentation of government-issued identification at voting sites; the challenging of the voting status of African Americans seeking to vote; the purging of African Americans from voter rolls; placing fewer polling stations in black communities than were needed to accommodate them; sending inferior voting equipment to black voting jurisdictions; the denial of voting rights to those formerly incarcerated; and other tactics. The distortion Du Bois wrote about

resides in the contradiction between actions aimed at preventing African Americans from voting, and thereby becoming part of the electoral process, and those actions that claimed to be democratic.⁴²

Political change was complicated in the post–World War II era because of the racial attitudes of the white majority. It is a *sine qua non* of political analysis that if left purely to public opinion, there would have been no civil rights laws passed in the 1960s. What was decisive was the pressure placed on the political system coming from African Americans and their allies. This pressure and the moral logic of the Civil Rights movement created a shifting tide of liberalism that opened a window of opportunity that had a powerful impact on politics and the development of public policy. This change occurred due to actions taken by the Civil Rights Movement and President Lyndon Johnson. Without detailed exposition of this historical reality, I want to assert that the linkage between public opinion and policy is often not direct. It is filtered through the media, the influence of which has grown substantially in the shaping of public perspectives on social policy.⁴³ The wealthy have direct access to elected officials and an indirect impact on the shaping of public policy through the control of the media, giving the expression of their attitudes and interests greater legitimacy.

Although white attitudes are often not the most credible on issues of race, they control the crucible in which the resolution of racial issues takes place, calling forth various political responses from the African American community and its leadership. Such has been the role of the NAACP and other civil rights organizations.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

In the 1960s there was a set of progressive black activists working in the South through organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Congress of Racial Equality, and other groups. However, in 1966 the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) was founded by Dr. George Wiley, a former chemistry professor at Syracuse University and civil rights organizer; and this new group challenged the civil rights leadership and the federal government to recognize the right of poor people to be supported adequately by their government. Wiley and the NWRO grew to 10,000 paid members in over a hundred chapters around the country in the short period from June 1966 to February 1968.⁴⁴ When Dr. King initiated the “poor people’s campaign” in 1968, there was considerable tension and acrimony inasmuch as the NWRO leaders felt that the issue of poverty and the conditions of the poorest citizens had not been a central aspect of the Civil Rights Movement. It was

even reported that on one occasion, Dr. King was astonished on a visit to a Mississippi plantation in 1965 to discover that the sharecroppers there had never seen U.S. currency.⁴⁵

Dr. King persisted in this direction as he took up the cause of the Memphis sanitation workers in 1968, responding to their call for help, and demonstrating his commitment to fight poverty. As contentious as his meeting in early 1968 had been with George Wiley and NWRO chairperson Johnnie Tillman, there was something of a symbiosis between them. Eventually, Geraldine Smith of NWRO became an organizer in Mississippi and Carol Williams of the Southern Consumer Cooperative assisted Dr. King in his work in Alabama.⁴⁶

John Lewis, a close associate of Dr. King's and an active SNCC worker at that time, came from a family of sharecroppers in Mississippi. Lewis once commented that there were too many people passed by in the reforms associated with the Civil Rights Movement. Lewis recognized that there were people all over the South, and throughout the nation, who were left behind in small rural towns and in urban neighborhoods and where the youth could never look forward to holding a decent, well-paying job.⁴⁷

The Memphis campaign was important because of the large black population, many of them living on "a plantation in the city."⁴⁸ Memphis was not exactly a setting that reflected what was occurring on plantations outside the city. The struggle for the rights of black workers in the city was assisted by powerful unions such as the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Workers that brought the new president Jerry Wurf and his assistant William Lucy into the fray. The Memphis struggle as the location of the death of Dr. King in April 1968 briefly pushed the issue of poor people to the center of the black agenda.⁴⁹

Unfortunately, Dr. King's death signaled the end, not the beginning, of the struggle to dignify and address the conditions of the black and white poor. The poor people's campaign was launched to realize Dr. King's vision of the struggle against poverty, but it was not sustained. Resurrection City was located on the Mall in the nation's capital in 1968, and was envisioned as the fulfillment of the dream expressed at the 1963 March on Washington. Unfortunately, Resurrection City and the attack on poverty were not to be resurrected as the central agenda of any of the remaining civil rights organizations. To be fair, no doubt, leaders of civil rights organizations felt that inasmuch as a substantial proportion of the African American community was poor or near-poor, their agenda of improved housing, education, employment, and civil rights, would benefit poor people by building a ladder for black upward mobility. Inasmuch as the ebb and flow of public policy has not allowed a sustained attack on black poverty, this view has been too optimistic.

FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM BY DEGREES

What is not in the lexicon of black progress is that at the very time of the Civil Rights Movement, there were African Americans whose freedom was circumscribed by the persistence of poverty. Admittedly, African Americans were victimized by segregated public facilities, the lack of equal access to employment, education, housing, and other aspects of civic life, but these matters were the central focus of the Civil Rights Movement. In many places in the South the results of that mobilization would create a wider web of citizenship rights and equal access to public resources that would provide a break with the classic condition of slavery for the average black southerner.

In the 1960s there were relatively small numbers of African Americans who had experienced “quasi-freedom” in the United States; some of them had been well educated—in places such as Harvard and other ivy league universities—as early as the 19th century. They maintained access to an elite social network, engaged in international travel, and were recognized in the United States as belonging to an upper class of African American leaders. Then there was the vast working class, most of whom had varying degrees of social mobility and a place in the American work force for about 60 percent of black males in the 1960s. Finally, there was a group of agricultural and industrial laborers in the backwaters of the South, many of whom experienced a mode of existence not that far removed from 19th-century slavery. The social process by which this group experienced freedom fit the title of a *Time* magazine story on the Dial brothers in Alabama in 1954, the last case of slavery prosecuted by the Justice Department, as “Abolition by Degrees.”⁵⁰ So, there existed within the African American community in the 100 years after the Civil War various degrees of “freedom” experienced by various segments of the population.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In most of the 19th century the United States was a slave society and that historical reality has resulted in significant limits on black freedom. The problem involves whether or not formerly enslaved workers and their descendants have the freedom to acquire and dispose of property as they wish, on the basis of equality and respect. The seizure of black bodies by the state and private interests was a process that did not countenance either respect or equality since the government allowed the practice of slavery to continue in various forms. There were no checks and balances for the victims of slavery.

As indicated, freedom—the physical and psychological freedom of all U.S. citizens—is related to the quality of democracy. The presence of freedom for white males allowed them to put in place a “herrenvolk democracy” in which they were

the only ones eligible by race, property ownership, and other requirements to run the state and participate in its civic culture. Slavery was a basic infringement upon the freedom of people of African descent. The various manifestations of uncivil treatment that either accompanied or followed slavery have limited the right and opportunity of African Americans to enjoy “freedom” to the same degree.

Writing at the beginning of the 21st century, it is still accurate to suggest that African Americans are not free because they are not equal in whatever aspect one wishes to address. That is to say, they are not able to operationalize the full range of resources that would enable them to participate in society on the same level with others largely because of the unresolved issues involved in their original enslavement. Thus, the measurable inequalities, resulting from slavery and its extension into the 20th century and represented in the lack of freedom and defined by the quality of American democracy, mocks the extent to which the United States can pretend to be a global model.

The story of the perpetuation of slavery into the 20th century is important because it unearths the limitations on black freedom found largely in the South and in the dark and sorry history of the oppressive exploitation of black labor. The result has been not only the pauperization of African Americans, but also of the southern region itself. The perpetrators of the physical or material inequalities promoted by the practice of slavery also cultivated the psychology of racial animus that appears to be part of a resentful set of attitudes. Racist views have survived into the 21st century and today are fed by the practicalities of holding on to political power, and by the realization that African Americans have survived and some have prospered, despite the heinous nature of the treatment they endured. Their survival and marching forward in every area of American life disproves notions about “racial inferiority.” At the same time, the extension of slavery into the 20th century explains why racist sentiments survived into the 21st century and how they continue to fuel attitudes that deprive African Americans of access to the resources needed to achieve full freedom.

This essay addresses the modern ramifications of the extension of slavery into the 20th century and should increase our understanding of the character of one of the injustices that has provided the powerful argument for reparations for descendants of U.S. slavery. By extending the discussion of slavery into the 20th century, it identifies the real beneficiaries of this injustice to living persons and families whose wealth was created by enslaved African Americans, but was accrued to the plantation owners, industrialists, and modern corporations that have been protected from accountability, and remain functioning entities today.

At the same time, the enslaved workers transferred the legacy of poverty and oppression to their descendants because their status did not allow the acquisition of wealth. Moreover, the ability to share equitably in the nation’s wealth was stifled by

laws that disavowed the historical reality that the status of the “enslaved workers” affected the status of their descendants. The use of the law as a tool to demand redress has not advanced the right of African Americans to that wealth because the legal technicalities of sovereign immunity, the statute of limitations, and other devices have worked to prevent African Americans from gaining access to it.

The fact that many thousands of black people were being shackled, maimed, killed, burned, and thrown into rivers throughout the 20th century defines the existence of a type of oppression that only recently was affected by the enforcement of criminal law. The “civil rights” protections and new socioeconomic opportunities allowed the entry into society of those who were ready to participate: to vote, to gain decent employment, to go to college, to purchase goods such as a home, and to enjoy other opportunities. For many millions of others, the civil rights regime was not as effective in correcting the impact that continued slavery maintained. Therefore, the reasons why some African Americans have not progressed as quickly as some of their black associates, or their white counterparts, has been mystified by denial of the utter and persistent debasement of their condition.

What we have discovered here is the tension existing in a society that has promoted the uplift aspirations of African Americans who have been able to take advantage of the opportunities that society offers, but attended far less to those who are still struggling with the limitations upon their life chances imposed by severity of their experience with slavery and slavery-like conditions in the 20th century. Perhaps this has been a problem of class, which one can see in the extent to which issues such as poverty and low-wage employment, mass incarceration, criminalization, and other forms of unequal justice impact masses and elites differentially, but social, political, and economic resources need to be deployed to change current realities for the black majority.

NOTES

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⁵Joe Feagin, “Slavery Unwilling to Die: The Background of Black Oppression in the 1980s,” *Journal of Black Studies* 17, 2 (December 1986): 174–75.

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⁷Ibid.

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¹⁶*Ibid.*, 280.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 283; William Julius Wilson, *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (New York, 2010).

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¹⁹Jay R. Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy after the Civil War* (Durham, NC, 1978), 48–49.

²⁰Allen and Farley, “The Shifting Social and Economic Tides,” 302.

²¹*Ibid.*, 304–06.

²²Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, “Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990,” in *U.S. Census Report, 1990* (Washington, DC, 2005).

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²⁴Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce “Historical Poverty Tables” at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/histpov/histpov2.html>.

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²⁸Linda Williams, *The Constraint of Race: Legacies of White Skin Privilege in America* (State College, PA, 2003), 82.

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³⁰*Ibid.*, 80.

³¹*Ibid.*, 83.

³²*Ibid.*, 89.

³³Feagin, “Slavery Unwilling to Die,” 199.

³⁴*Ibid.*

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³⁸Bill Cosby and Alvin Poussaint, *Come On People: On the Path from Victims to Victors* (Nashville, TN, 2007).

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⁴⁰W. E. B. Du Bois, “Reconstruction, Seventy-Five Years After,” *Phylon* 4 (3rd Quarter, 1943): 211.

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⁴⁶Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York, 2007), 184.

⁴⁷“The Media and the Civil Rights Movement,” conference held at Center for Southern Culture, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, 3–7 April 1987.

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