THE NEGRO MIGRATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

GUY B. JOHNSON

I

THE NORTHWARD movement of the negro attracts attention, not because it is a migration, but because it is a negro migration. What is there about the shifting of a mere half-million negroes from the South to the North to cause the nation more anxiety than did the arrival annually of one million foreign-born in the pre-war days? Why should it be considered more serious than the great urban migration which has in the last forty years transformed us from a rural to an urban nation? Such a phenomenon indeed calls for intelligent explanation.

The various explanations which have been pronounced are more partisan than scientific. At one extreme there is the belief that the migration is primarily a flight from persecution. The following is an example of a somewhat prejudiced judgment:

Racial factors, as much as economic motives, have been responsible for the tremendous migration of the negro to the North, for the treatment which he has been receiving from the southern white man has been making it literally every hour more undesirable and impossible for him to remain in the South. In sections of the South where the negro has gained control of corporations, banks, insurance and real estate companies, which represent the group investment of negroes to the amount of millions of dollars, lynchings and race riots and the reign of mob terror are so much in the air that it needs only slight persuasion for the negro to pack up, sell out, and move North.¹

At the other extreme is the attitude taken by so many southern writers who see nothing but ingratitude in the negro's repudiation of the Southland; for, think they, the South is the natural home of the negro, and no one in all the world understands him like the southern white man. Still others believe that the migration is artificial and cannot proceed much further.

Between these extremes the truth is somewhere to be found. The most cursory examination of the available facts should have precluded hasty judgments, for although such data as we have are somewhat meager, they indicate certain trends and clues.

Is the negro migration motivated primarily by economic forces or by social forces? This question has monopolized much of the discussion on the problem. And indeed it deserves a great part of our attention, for the final significance of the negro migration in American history shall depend upon whether it is a temporary response to unusual economic conditions, or a permanent phenomenon representing fundamental changes in our agricultural and industrial organization.

II

ANALYSIS OF THE MIGRATION

Obviously no single factor can explain the migration. One always comes nearer the truth by assuming a multiplicity of factors in explaining the causation of a social movement.

(1) A process of urbanization—First of all, the negro migration must be regarded as a part of the great process of urbanization. Ever since the Civil War there has been a steadily increasing drift of negroes to the cities of both the North and the South. Emancipation alone was a force making for greater mobility of the once subjet race, and the subsequent direction of southern agriculture made it inevitable that the negro should have to seek his fortune more and more in the urban world.

Some northward migration there has always been, but it did not become remarkable until

¹ Eric Walrond in New Republic, July 18, 1923.
after the World War began. Does the fact that the main current of negro migration turned to northern cities make it any less an urbanization process? Many writers become confused at this point, preferring to interpret the migration across the Mason-Dixon line as a flight from persecution. But there is no more than a negligible difference between the attitudes and motives of the negro who moves from southern farm to southern city and the negro who moves from southern farm to northern city.

Now the result of this changed direction of the negro urban trend is a different matter. Life in the North for the negro is going to have far-reaching effects upon him—effects which he perhaps does not now remotely perceive. If this were not true, the migration would have very little national significance. These effects we may reserve for later consideration.

(2) An economic phenomenon—Urbanization is itself a phase of the great industrial revolution. Therefore we must suppose economic motives to a greater or lesser degree to be behind the negro migration. To begin with, the curve for the northward migration shows two high points: one during the industrial high-tide of the war, and the other in 1923 after the recovery from business depression. The latter suggests another factor: restriction of immigration. Statistics show that while the Three Per Cent Law admits some 300,000 or more Europeans annually, the net gain in unskilled laborers is slightly over 60,000. Certainly the negro is filling a part of the vacancy occasioned by the shortage of foreign labor.

Industrial expansion during the war and the restriction of immigration, then, may be called the economic “pull” of the North. On the other side there has been a corresponding “push” from the South. Short cotton crops have contributed their share to the negro’s dissatisfaction with the southern farm. Furthermore, a tendency toward the concentration of land ownership in many of the Southern states is halting the negro in his acquisition of agricultural lands.

It must be clearly stated at this point that we are not attempting to dispose of the question by showing its economic implications. We are simply calling attention to the apparent economic phases of the migration without insisting dogmatically that they are all-important.

(3) An expression of social unrest—That the northward migration also represents a growing restlessness of the American negro cannot be denied. The relative importance of this element of unrest cannot yet be determined because of the complexity of factors, but there is evidence to show that it is operating. Too often this spirit of unrest has been regarded as a fiercely rebellious attitude which the southern negro has developed in the past few years, from which it is reasoned that the migration is a reaction from unfair conditions and per se grill. But those who are thoroughly acquainted with negroes in the South are well aware that the illiterate, indifferent, dependent negro is still typical. Race consciousness and racial aspirations mean practically nothing to him, and the spirit of unrest is very little more than the mere realization that he could move if conditions became unbearable.

There is a small minority of southern negroes, however, who, having advantages above the average of their race in education, culture, and living conditions, are keenly aware of their problems, are race conscious, and resent sharply their position as an inferior caste. Doubtless this class is adding more and more to the stream of migrants; but for the great mass of negroes in the south unrest is yet a somewhat unsubstantial feeling—not a primary motive for migration, but occasionally strong enough to turn the scales in favor of a northward move.

Social unrest will doubtless in time become characteristic of negro life. It is inevitable that as the process of education widens and the circle of race consciousness expands, the negro shall be less and less inclined to accept his present status. The real test of the strength of this factor in the present migration will come later when the economic motives mentioned above have receded in importance.

To repeat, the final significance of the negro migration depends upon whether it is a temporary adjustment to abnormal industrial conditions or a permanent reaction representing fundamental

---

8 The following statistics are significant here: Between 1888 and 1918, Montgomery County, Georgia, had five lynchings. The negro population decreased from 7,310 to 4,346; the white population from 12,318 to 4,768. If lynching caused migration from this county, it affected the whites more than the blacks. In Harrison County, Texas, in spite of 16 lynchings between 1900 and 1920, the negro population increased from 12,344 to 15,439.
changes in the economic and social fabric of the nation. If southern agriculture sees the passing of King Cotton and the wholesale adoption of scientific methods, the day of the negro on the southern farm is over, and well might he seek home and fortune in the more promising North and West. After all, only a half-million negroes have deserted the South during the present migration—not enough to justify much anxiety yet—and the movement must go on until it has deprived the South of several millions of its colored population before its national consequences can be remarkable. That southern agriculture is changing, however, cannot be doubted, so that at least one cause of the migration may be regarded as permanent. Then, too, the presence of a negro labor supply in the North has already done much to quiet the cry for immigration, so that the restriction of immigration also bids fair to become a permanent feature. It would do no harm, at any rate, for the nation to regard the migration as a force which shall in the end achieve a complete redistribution of negro population, and to prepare accordingly to meet the strain on existing racial adjustments.

III

Consequences of the Migration

Assuming, then, that the migration is to go far beyond its present proportions, what are the consequences? Perhaps more thought has been given to the causes of the migration than to the results, but the time is rapidly approaching when such results, not causes and conditions, must occupy our attention.

The more immediate results of the migration need little elaboration. Let us outline them briefly.

1) Agricultural—Southern agriculture has few regrets over the loss of the negro, for the southern white land-owner is waking to the fact that the exodus of the negro is a result and not a cause of the agricultural crisis and that his elimination is a healthful sign. Problems there will be, of course, (such as labor shortage for a few years) but the net result shall be the improvement of agriculture and the emancipation of the southern white farmer from his old master, black labor.

2) Industrial—The negro as a laborer in the north is already creating new problems. On the one hand, they are the same problems as appear with respect to an influx of cheap foreign labor; on the other hand, they are problems of race. The East St. Louis and Chicago race riots are evidence of the inevitable race conflict which must precede the mutual adjustment of the negro and northern industry.

3) Political—The negro vote has already become the pawn of politicians in northern cities, notably Chicago, and it is not improbable that the negro may become such a power in municipal politics that the philosophy and practice of the North in regard to his political status may be at variance. Of course, the extent to which the negro in the North will use the ballot toward improving his racial status cannot be foreseen, but we may point out the fact that a wide range of problems may arise from that direction.

4) An intensified struggle for existence is not least among the consequences of the migration—not only of negro versus negro and versus white labor, but of the negro with the northern winters, low wages, poor housing, social discrimination, and a host of other conditions. Thus far the death-rate of the negro in the North exceeds his birth-rate, and this is perhaps due to the intense economic struggle for existence rather than to any natural incapacity of the negro to endure northern climatic conditions. Certainly there shall be a weeding-out process for a time, and the negro who learns his lesson of health and hygiene is the one who shall survive.

Now let us take the broad look and attempt to detect the more ultimate consequences of the redistribution of negro population.

1) The race problem cannot remain sectional—that is certain. Once it could be ignored or disposed of philosophically by the North and West. Gradually, however, as the entire nation comes into daily contact with the negro at an increasing number of points, problems of race relations shall begin to have a national tone. Sections which have never known the meaning of the negro question are destined to become intensely interested in their new “race problems.” Between the discriminating practices of the South and the abstract equality of the North opinion shall vacillate in these new negro sections until black-white relations are re-defined.

2) New racial adjustments—Old racial adjustments are rapidly weakening. The rise of the
Ku Klux Klan is largely attributable to a reaction to the liberal tendency in race relations. Certainly the redistribution of the negro population is to strain present racial adjustments still more. The North is going to learn more about the negro in the next ten years than it has learned since the Civil War; and however much we would like to believe otherwise, the attitude of the North cannot help but become a shade less tolerant than it has been. Thousands of negroes who find economic salvation in the North are to be disappointed socially. That inevitable color line will intrude, and the negro will be forced back into his own race, will be thrown more and more upon the organizations and institutions of his own race for his salvation.

We must not think of the negro in the North as being permanently a mere industrial factor. Sooner or later he will enter commercial, business, and professional pursuits and shall live in the smaller cities and towns of the North as well as in the industrial centers. It is then—when the negro is distributed fairly evenly throughout the North—that the real test of present racial attitudes shall come.

Let us take, for example, a typical small town of the North and examine the racial situation. Delaware, Ohio, claims to have no race problem. Its total population is 8,756, of which 2.9 per cent is colored. The negroes have rather naturally settled in one section of the town. They maintain three churches, one bank, several stores, and two pool rooms. Population is stationary; in 1922 there were eight negro births and eight deaths, and there was no gain or loss by migration. In 1922 there was not a single case of negro crime, and family trouble and immorality are quite rare. Employment is fairly regular, and, while the negroes suffer from low wages and unsanitary living conditions, they offer no great burden in the way of pauperism, defective-ness, or delinquency. On the whole, Delaware could hardly be distinguished from the typical southern small town in respect to its race relations, except for the fact that in Delaware the children of both races attend the same schools.

Let us imagine that ten years hence the negro population of this town is 15 per cent of the total; that the question of segregation threatens; that competition between whites and negroes becomes keen; that family demoralization, child delin-quent, and poverty increase; that the contacts at school and public places become more frequent. Would the people of Delaware maintain their traditional attitude of tolerance? Very likely they would not; and how much more critical the situation would be in the larger cities! What passes for tolerance in the North is often only a passive intolerance, and there is danger that the North may react too far from its traditional belief in equality.

Truly, racial adjustments are going to be tested in every way. However much we would like to believe that the spirit of cooperation in race relations is going to become supreme as a result of the North's new interest in the problem, we must admit that human nature and history point the other way, namely, that the attitude of the masses of the whites is more likely to become less tolerant.

In the South, too, the agricultural exodus is leaving an urban-dwelling negro race more and more at the mercy of the white man. While the movement toward inter-racial cooperation will doubtless continue to grow, it cannot counteract the tendency toward a more rigid southern caste system.

Both in the North and in the South, then, the opportunity to put race relations on an intelligent and cooperative basis shall challenge us; but our emotional and impulsive reactions are likely to triumph, with the net result that the negro shall be forced to depend upon himself to an increasing extent. How difficult to dare test democracy in race relations, to practice equality, to permit open competition; and how easy to put the whole thing out of the realm of conflict by entrenching behind the barriers of caste.

(3) Birth of negro nationalism—Any attempt to solve the race problem by a caste arrangement merely postpones the day when the white man must face the issue squarely and settle it, not according to his own convenience, but by making concessions to the powerful and race-conscious blacks. The progress of the negro since emancipation should be warning enough against the caste method.

The city has ever been the birthplace of intense racial consciousness and of nationalism. The case of the negro is not far different from that of the Central European racial groups which developed the spirit of nationalism during the nine-
teenth century. The concentration of negro population in American cities points toward the rise of a class of negroes dependent upon industrial labor and limited business pursuits—the negro middle class. And it is only a matter of time until this class manifests that consciousness which has so often been the mother of nationalism.

Is the rise of negro nationalism too improbable, impossible? No. Does not every intolerant move of the white man beget stronger consciousness in the negro race? And does not every inter-racial cooperative effort teach the negro the way to self-development and power? Negro leaders are even now grasping the idea of a racial mission, of a divinely ordained plan behind the negro's bondage and his struggle with the white race, of the negro's right to a national existence, and soon the disciples of the new nationalism shall carry the message to all their race.

It is not that the negro is at present fully aware of any nationalistic movement on his part. His motives for migration are a different matter from the remote effects which that migration is going to have upon him. But history teaches us that the subordinate race, having tasted half-freedom and having sipped of the higher culture of the "superior" race, but finding the barriers set up against complete equality, turns to nationalism as a means of achieving its aspirations; and the broad look through the present shifting of negro population leads to the conviction that one of its greatest consequences shall be a movement toward negro nationalism.

COMMISSION ON RACE RELATIONS
NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE

A Tentative Statement—To encourage and assist inquiries into the nature of the relationships between different racial and national groups in American communities, estimating the evidences of mutual understandings and locating the nature and origin of existing or threatening misunderstandings, maladjustments and conflicts between such groups.

To make available for those participating in such inquiries material for a comparison of their experience and personal knowledge with the wider experience of the world in race relations and with scientific knowledge concerning the underlying factors.

To promote, on the basis of such inquiries and by means of examples from the experience of other communities and groups, the discovery of ways of conduct by which understanding and good will between racial and national groups may be conserved and misunderstandings be removed, maladjustments be remedied and conflicts be averted; and the choice of experimental measures through which members of the group itself may actively apply such conduct.

The total inquiry would, therefore, stimulate a desire to participate, by personal conduct and group action, in a nation-wide effort to find a way of life which would bring racial groups into right relationships and to compare this with the principles of life and conduct evolved through Christian experience.