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The Present Position of the Negro Farm Population: The Bottom Rung of the Farm Ladder

OLIVE M. STONE

No segment of the population of the United States is so disadvantaged as the present Negro farm population. Not only does it have the historical handicap of having come late, and under abnormal conditions, upon the scene of American civilization. It has been identified throughout its history with what is now the most dependent of all regions of the nation, the South, and what is admittedly the most subordinate of all the occupations, agriculture. Added to these three encircling circumstances of time, place and job, the Negro farmer finds himself hedged about by the fact that he is the member of a minority race, discriminated against, in varying degrees, at all levels of attainment. And, what is more important, he is in the main the member of an exploited class.

To get a perspective on this Southeastern Negro agriculturist and his five-fold disadvantage, let us imagine that we are looking through field glasses at the circumstances which surround and restrict him, and at the methods he has employed to break through these barriers. We shall start with as broad a view as we can, and with each turn of the lens, narrow the circle until the principal object looms clear.

Historical, Geographic and Occupational Barriers

Focusing wide, in point of time and importance, we find almost upon the periphery, compared to other factors, the fact that the Negro farmer is chronologically retarded. Coming to America as a primitive, snatched from his native haunts, he had this historical backwardness of his artificially pegged by slavery and its aftermath at crippling low stages of progress. Some isolated areas like the Sea Islands along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia show, through the archaic English language and customs in use there, that certain portions of the Negro farm population are still living at the lowest cultural level of seventeenth century advance.¹ A larger number, the majority in fact, has been held in the eddy of antebellum standards and relationships, a semifeudal people. Thus, hovering in the background and casting its shadow upon all the rest, is the historical handicap.

Eighty per cent of all Negroes and ninety-seven per cent of the Negro farm population live in the South, predominantly in ten Southeastern cotton states—Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Flori-

¹Guy B. Johnson, Folk Culture on St. Helena Island.
Arkansas, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana. They live in a region which has been stripped of almost all of its power and independence by other regions, and especially by the new Southwest with its large-scale, mechanized farming. Dependent upon Northern capital and credit, the Southeast takes on many features of a subject country forced to pay tribute regularly to the financial lords and industrial magnates who consider her natural resources, her amenable entrepreneurs, and her cheap, contented labor supply, a good risk, if not a safe investment. Differentials in freight rates and other regional impediments furnish the excuse for differentials in wages. Southern industrialists, borrowing money from Eastern credit monopolists and selling with disadvantageous freight rates in markets controlled by these same financiers, claim that they must let labor absorb the heightened cost of production. In turn, Southern planters, forced to sell in an open world market while buying from a protected home market, feel justified in making up their slack in profits through super-exploitation of tenants, croppers and laborers.

The semi-colonial nature of the Southeast is further borne out by the way wealth produced there is drained off continuously to other regions. North Carolina, for example, in spite of her Dukes and Reynolds, ranks among the lowest states in the Union in income tax returns. Southern labor, most of it black labor in the cotton and tobacco strongholds, produces wealth only to see it take wings out of the producers' hands, out of the producers' land, and into the coffers of Eastern capitalists.

Closely allied with the dependent nature of the geographical area is the subordinate status of the occupation of agriculture today. The unequal tax burden, the discriminatory nature of protective legislation, particularly the tariff, the enormous middleman's spread, the straining toward mechanization in a machine age, the utter dependence upon capital and credit in an era of advanced capitalism, are some of the factors which conspire to make agriculture subservient to industry and finance. What is true of agriculture in general is doubly true of agriculture in the Southeast, or Old South, where eroded and exhausted soil, outmoded and costly methods of production, abject poverty and ignorance among the mass of the farm population, make effective rivalry with the new Southwest difficult, if not impossible. As Dr. Rupert Vance has so aptly said in a recent study, in which he shows how the small delta areas of Arkansas and Mississippi have been the only parts of the Old South able to hold their own: "This they have done partly because of the superior fertility. But in common with all Southeastern areas, they have survived by forcing their tenants to bear much of the brunt of losing competition."²

**RACE AND CLASS AMONG FARMERS**

With a turn of the lens, we bring our focus closer to the heart of the

²R. B. Vance, "The Negro Agricultural Worker under the Federal Rehabilitation Program". (Mimeoographed copy, p. 3).
Negro farmer's problem. As important as the historical, geographical, and occupational handicaps are, none is so restrictive as race and class. So important are the two factors and so interdependent, it is next to impossible to treat them separately. And history has shown that neither taken alone can unlock the door to the Negro problem. In a region where racial prejudice has been used as an economic and political weapon to prevent change and to avert disaffection, where it has become a crippling divisive force in the use of public funds and facilities for health, education, transportation, etc., there is no belittling the importance of race. It was used in slavery days to keep down unrest among the poor whites and during the Civil War to combat their resistance to conscription. It was employed during the Reconstruction Period to split the followers of Radical Republicanism and later to blunt the edge of the Populists' fight. It is an ancient and well- tried device.

But racial discrimination is not just a haven of refuge for preservers of the status quo in eras of revolt. It is a practice kept oiled and working by regular and steady application in everyday life. There is not an index of economic, social, political and cultural opportunity or recognition of achievement in which the Negro is not given a lower rating than the white. In wage and salary scales, in length of school terms, in adequacy of health, recreational, and cultural facilities, in segregated working, travelling and living quarters, and even in the administration of relief, the Negro is relegated to an inferior position.

What has been the situation on the farm? To draw upon Dr. Vance's study again, Negro owners are charged higher prices, allowed less resale value, and assessed steeper taxes for land than are whites. Negro tenants are given smaller acreage, lower value in buildings and implements, and charged higher cash rent proportionately than whites. At the end of seven decades, the freed Negro farmers, in spite of thrift and industry, find only 20.6 per cent of their number, in contrast to 52.7 per cent of the whites, to have attained the rank of peasant proprietor and few of those have debt-free holdings. Since 1920, they have witnessed a 20 per cent loss in the small acreage they held and a 40 per cent decrease in farm values. Increasing numbers have dropped from the relatively secure and desirable position of cash tenant into the ranks of sharecroppers, or have sunk still further into that most unenviable of positions, that of the seasonal laborer.

All of these differences between Negro and white in standards and opportunities are readily recognized as differences of degree rather than of kind. The white farmer in the lower categories is particularly as insecure and helpless. There is one racial difference, however, which is a difference of kind and therefore must be given greater emphasis. I refer to the political differential. The leaders of the newly-freed Negro farmers of the Reconstruction Era, as Spero and Harris have well pointed out, put too much faith in the efficacy of political action alone,
in the attainment and exercise of civil rights. The result was that they soon found how ephemeral a power it can be without a solid economic base. On the other hand, the inability of the disfranchised to back up their striving for improved living and working conditions with political pressure is a serious lack which must not be underestimated. Many people go so far as to say, as James Allen does, in the May, 1935, issue of the Crisis, that complete economic freedom and equality can never be realized until political institutions are established, carrying with them the fullest democracy for the mass of people.

With 82 per cent of all the black men who work on farms in the categories of tenant, cropper, and laborer, the Negro farm population is essentially a working-class population. And so we come circuitously, and I hope not too tediously, to the pith of the matter. To understand the present position of the Negro farm population fully, one must examine the economic nature of that position. Perhaps no more graphic way can be used to portray the class orientation of the Negro farmer than through the farm ladder. On what rung of the ladder of ownership, of land use, of capital, of credit, of technological advance, of culture, does he stand?

**Essential Nature of the Farm Ladder**

The farm ladder, brought in by the commercial revolution to replace the pyramid of feudal tenure, is sup-

*Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, The Black Worker.*
Earlier still, following the Black Death in England, wages went up so high that ordinary laborers got it into their heads that they would just climb up out of their category. But the government stepped in with a Royal Proclamation in 1349, ordering all laborers to remain on the land and to accept the low wages current in 1346. The Peasants’ Revolts which grew out of this and out of the Enclosures resulted in swinging the ladder free from its locked position for a brief period.

In the United States, the ladder-climbing of farmers, in like manner, has been confined, except for those who rise through marriage or inheritance, to periods of terrific shake-up. All during the frontier days, of course, a certain amount of climbing was done through the process of moving on to new territory. Even there, however, certain groups managed to get their feet on the upper rungs first and with the aid of various devices familiar to students of the land-grabbing era, shoved their poorer rivals back down the ladder. In Alabama, for instance, force, cunning, and legal trickery were employed to take the yeoman’s holdings away and to push him off the black prairies into the sand barrens and the mountains. After the Civil War, on the other hand, quite a few yeomen succeeded in ascending to considerable height. During the present depression, a group of banker-farmers has also found it possible, through foreclosures, to mount the farm ladder with dispatch and ease. With 80 per cent of all farm mortgages (and there are only 27 per cent of owner-operated farms which are not mortgaged) in the hands of banks, insurance companies, and other agencies, we may see other farmers—shall we say, “white-collar farmers?”—climb up to landlordism.

On the whole, however, according to good authorities in the field, including Branson, Hobbs, Bizzell, and others, the farm ladder is something to descend rather than to climb. Ashby, Davies and Jones come to the conclusion that without an expansion of cultivated area, either intensive or extensive, or without a regular efflux of farmers to other occupations, there can be no healthy operation of the ladder. Expansion makes possible a limited amount of rising without a corresponding displacement. An efflux of farmers to

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*Even though W. J. Spillman is an ardent exponent of the ladder principle, he shows clearly in an article, “The Agricultural Ladder,” in Sorokin et al., *A Systematic Source Book in Rural Sociology*, Vol. I, p. 523, that it works very poorly. Combining two tables on p. 524, for example, we find that only 15.4 per cent of 2,112 midwestern farm owners studied climbed through the three stages of unpaid family labor, hired labor, and tenancy to ownership by commercial purchase rather than by inheritance, marriage, or purchase from a near relative, while 7.1 per cent and 6.7 per cent passed through either the hired labor or the tenancy stage in similar manner. In other words, 29.2 per cent, or less than one-third of all the owners, climbed the ladder in the conventional fashion. An inquiry by the U. S. Bureau of Agricultural Economics in 1920 showed that only 18 per cent of 20,000 owners throughout the U.S. had ever been nonowners. (See U.S.D.A. *Yearbook*, 1928, p. 536, quoted by Vance, op. cit.)

*American State Papers, Public Lands, V.*

—Ibid. See also T. P. Abernethy, *The Formative Period in Alabama.*

other occupations, on the other hand, usually means not only the loss of enterprising producers but the loss of capital. The latter deficiency must be made up through borrowing, which means "working for the banks", or saving, which means running the family on a hazardously low standard of consumption.  

In study after study, the change in tenure has been found to be a downward one. In an article entitled, "Abolish Tenancy", John and Emily Maclachlan show how, in the half century from 1880 to 1930, tenancy has increased from about one-third of the farm population to approximately two-thirds in most Southern states.  

Let us take the case of Mississippi as a specific example. In 1880, 43.8 per cent of the farmers were tenants. By 1930, this category had expanded to include 72.8 per cent, and of the little more than 27 per cent left with nominal ownership, only 13 per cent owned debt-free land.  

Since 1930, the process has been rapidly accelerated. On a single day in February, 1932, forty thousand farms, representing seven million acres, or one-fourth of the total farm area of the State, were sold under the sheriff's hammer for delinquent taxes. And Senator Harrison, speaking of the incident in Congress, said, and rightly, that what happened in Mississippi on a single day was taking place on a more gradual scale all over the South.

From frontier days onward there has been an increasing tendency toward social and economic stratification on all, and particularly southeastern, farms. Two definite processes have been steadily at work, concentration of power into fewer and fewer hands and deterioration of control on the part of the majority.

**Stratification of the Farm**

The process of deterioration goes something like this. The smaller commercial owners in an era of severe competition find it increasingly difficult to hold their own in the struggle. Gradually they are swallowed up by creditors unless a public policy is adopted to retire them from the open market and induce them to "live at home", self-sustaining but non-competing. On their peasant holdings they escape for a time the double rivalry of large agriculturist and industrialist. They can raise their food and weave the cloth for their clothes, let home-made remedies suffice for medical care and get a little hit-or-miss schooling. But somehow they cannot produce all the necessities of consumption, notably salt, coffee, matches, etc., nor can they manufacture implements of production, except of the most primitive sort. And, worst luck of all, they cannot grow money for taxes no matter how fertile the soil. So
eventually, in spite of thrift and pluck, the subsistence farm owners find themselves so indebted for taxes and crop loans that they have to let go their proud claims to land titles and drop down into the next lower category—that of tenant. They may, with good luck, be able to maintain the independence of cash renters if they have managed to salvage their work stock and implements, but once the downward trek is begun, there is no feeling of security about the ultimate goal. As one farmer put it: "While there is a worse, there ain't no guarantee on earth that I won't land there."

As long as there was an expanding world market, as long as there were new frontiers at home or abroad, it was different. Now it is a question of dividing and redividing the advantages of a rapidly deteriorating soil and a steadily shrinking market, and the sharper the competition the more perilous becomes the inevitable descent of the losers.

**Concentration of Wealth and Power**

Along with the process of deterioration and stratification that has been taking place among a larger and larger number of small and middle-sized farm owners and tenants, a complementary process of concentration of farm wealth and power has been under way. Commercial farming, for all its vast superiority over feudal agriculture, has had latent within it since its beginning the same germs of monopoly that have budded and bloomed in the industrial world. The chief characteristic of commercial farming, in fact, is its utter dependence upon credit. Therefore, it can easily be determined at what stage of advance commercial or capitalistic agriculture is by seeing the type or terms of credit available.

**Credit and Capitalization**

As credit has played an increasingly important rôle in the modern world, we have seen the amount of business transacted on credit rise from an inconsiderable figure to the present all-high figure of over 90 per cent. We have seen the emergence of a huge branch of business, the banking business, whose sole purpose is to manufacture and to sell credit.

Does credit, this all-important factor in capitalistic farming, operate uniformly for all categories of farm producers? In years of expanding agriculture, private or commercial credit is naturally more available to all. The greater the risk of the lender and the smaller the security of the borrower, the shorter the term and the steeper the rate of interest. A curious anomaly, from the unbusinesslike point of view of human welfare, results. The farmer who is the poorest and the least able to pay is compelled to mortgage his very livelihood and to carry an interest rate which, if applied to any first-rate business concern, would bring bankruptcy within a year or less. On the other hand, the man who needs credit least in view of his financial independence is the one who can most adeptly arrange credit terms of a favorable nature. Long-term credit, closed like a bolted door to the crop-
per, tenant or wage laborer, is accessible to the landlord at interest rates from one-fifth to one-eighth as high.

It has never been the policy of governments in this country or abroad to usurp credit advantages of banks and other loan agencies. In good times, the most that the government does is to aid the banks through favorable legislation and otherwise to further their operations. During bad times, however, the government comes forward to relieve the creditors of bad debts. This was done in 1916 when the federal government, through an arrangement between the Federal Farm Board and the Joint Stock Land Banks, made it possible for land mortgage houses, insurance companies, and trust companies, to transfer small and doubtful business to the federal system and “to get the cream of the new business,” as Dr. S. H. Hobbs, Jr., says, by lending larger loans at higher income and less risk.

In like manner, the present administration, through the Agricultural Adjustment program of refinancing, has taken the hopeless debts off the creditors’ hands and has assumed the risks formerly borne by private concerns by dealing with producers having good security. The plan for payment of interest and for amortization of principal is exceedingly favorable but is made available only to owners who can put up security equal to 50 per cent of the loan. Thirty-seven per cent of all owner-operators in the Southeastern region, to say nothing of the huge army of tenants and croppers, have not sufficient equity to apply. No tenants or croppers can take advantage of the government’s bounty in the field of credit unless their landlords are willing to accept a second crop lien as security for rent. Many landlords, however, prefer to get the government’s production loan themselves, at reasonable interest rates, and pass it on to the cropper with exorbitant time-merchant charges.

Whether the aim of the present credit policy is to maintain the status quo in social strata or not, it operates not only to keep lower strata from rising out of their indebtedness and dependence but also in a selective fashion to concentrate power and wealth into fewer and fewer hands.

But how long has this process of concentration been under way? Within half a decade after the Civil War and the break-up of the feudal-plantation system, the number of farms in the South increased 26 per cent. The heyday of the new commercial or capitalistic farming from 1870 to 1880 saw a further increase of 96 per cent with a corresponding decrease in acreage per farm. By 1890, however, the process of concentration had set in. As early as 1900, according to the only United States Census giving an adequate picture, the owners of five or more rented farms held title to from one-third to one-half of the total number of farms in the Gulf states. Special studies by the United States Department of Agriculture for 1910 and for 1920 of selected counties in Alabama and Mississippi show as high as 71.6 per cent and 81.2 per cent of the rented farms to be in the hands of
landlords owning five or more farms. The corresponding percentages for Alabama and Mississippi in 1900 were 46.7 per cent and 53.1 per cent, respectively. By 1930, Wilson Gee could say in his analysis of "Master Farmers" selected by the Progressive Farmer that they averaged 660 acres per farm as compared to the Southern average of 106 acres. Their land value per farm was $51,111 in contrast to the Southern average of $2,861, or $76 per acre in contrast to $16. The value of their farm equipment was $3,374 as opposed to the Southern average of $178, and the value of their livestock, $5,488 as opposed to $359. In Mississippi, Dr. Gee shows landholdings running as high in total value as $145,302 to the single property owner. This contrasts with the average "Master Farmer's" $79,805 and the average Southern farmer's $4,136. The "Master Farmer's" net income was four times the gross income of the average farmer and his gross income fifteen times as great.

Technological Discrepancies

A study of technological improvements reveals the same striking contrasts between the social strata that we have just seen in the availability of credit and of capitalization. According to every chart which one can make depicting differences in value of lands and buildings, use of farm machinery, trucks, and tractors, possession of modern implements, adoption of consumptive im-

ments such as gas, electricity, telephone and piped water, there is a definite concentration of the bulk of these advancements in the upper 10 per cent of the farm population. Many factors enter into the computing of net incomes, and the federal government has undertaken it only for farm owners. Less than one per cent of the owners in the Southeast had a net income of $1,500 or more in 1932, and only 7.8 per cent had above $500. The majority of the owners fall between the $500 mark and the minus $500 mark, 48.7 per cent coming between $0 and $500 and 37.8 per cent between $0 and $500, with 4.5 per cent losing more than $500 during the year. Perhaps the value of production, since it is a less complicated measure, will come nearer giving a true picture. Grouping the farmers into three categories according to gross production, we find that 64.7 per cent of all cotton farmers receive only 30.6 per cent of the total value of production, that 32.6 per cent get 48.6 per cent, while 2.7 per cent take in 20.8 per cent or twenty times as much per person as farmers in the lowest category.

Cultural Inequalities

Cultural standards are difficult to determine with exactness. Nor is it easy to relate variations within them to variations between different economic levels. One immediately recognizes, however, that qualitative differences must accompany such striking quantitative discrepancies. In health, education, and recreation

13Ibid., p. 123.
14U.S. Department of Agriculture, Crops and Markets, 1933.
there are many observable gaps in the public services among the poorest and most backward elements and the better advantaged ones. These gaps are seen in scientific advice by farm and home demonstration agents, medical care, and numerous other ways. Even families on relief are fed somewhat in accordance with previous standards on the assumption, it would appear, that a cropper's stomach has shrunk to a smaller capacity than that of an owner's.

That is the picture, as I see it, of the present position of the Negro farm population, hedged about by the encircling factors of history, geography, occupation, race, and class. At least, that is the coldly quantitative picture. It might be interesting, if not scientific, to translate these objective facts into pulsating human reactions. What does the Negro farmer think and feel about his own plight?

**The Qualitative Picture**

There was a time when the dominant attitude was that of submission or escape rather than a realistic grappling with conditions. "God would deliver" or "Marse John would have mercy" or "times would change somehow." There is a Negro spiritual called "Climbing Jacob's Ladder" which seems to typify this point of view. It starts off, you may remember, on a low, weary tone; rises slowly, almost lumberingly, to a higher note and fuller volume; then swells to a joyous crescendo. Singing it at the reluctant heels of an old brown mule in the cotton patch, the longing type of plowhand would lift his head, with closed eyes, and if the fly-switching tail did not tangle up his lines, visualize wonderful things. Visualize heavy-footed angels trudging painfully up the lower rungs of a steep ladder until, toward the top, they suddenly found their wings and soared up to Jacob's God, slap to the Throne of Grace!

Such song-yearning used to help a fellow keep up his courage; made it easier for him to labor from "can see to can't see" in chopping and picking seasons; helped him forget about the soreness of his rag-covered muscles. It kept him from asking why he should go on turning fat-back and corn pone into energy, energy into crops, and crops into nothing but partial payment on a deathless debt.

For an increasing number of Southern farmers, white and Negro, the days of climbing the Jacob's ladder of wishful thinking are over. They are organizing from Virginia to Texas, from Arkansas to Florida, into tenants' and croppers' and small farmers' unions and militantly protesting rather than passively acquiescing to the marked inadequacies of ladder relief, ladder credit, and ladder opportunities of an economic and social nature.

**Negroes' Efforts to Overcome Handicaps**

In fact, history is replete with the militant and courageous efforts of considerable numbers of Negro farmers to better their condition. In the most resourceful fashion they have used every method at their disposal to accomplish their purpose, bat-
tling against terrific odds with little more at their command than the strength of sheer numbers and the power of united action. Slave revolts, migrations to distant and untried sections requiring real herculean in the venture, organized demonstrations, and strikes, the use of civil and constitutional channels, agrarian, racial, and finally class protests fill every period of Negro history. It is a long cry from the inarticulate struggle of slavery days to the organized activity of the modern era, but each stage has prepared the way for the next.

The question remains, are the masses of Negro farmers more race conscious than class conscious and more agrarian than either? Can they, the most backward and most downtrodden element in American society today, be expected to overcome their lethargy sufficiently to do something about their situation themselves? And once aroused to action, can they, a minority group, be counted upon to break through an ancient distrust and ally themselves with city workers and whites in striving for better conditions? Rumblings of activity on the farm front somewhat allay the despair of those who once doubted it, while striking fear into the hearts of those who trusted in ignorance, poverty, isolation, and the force of habit to avert such an eventuality.

**Proposed Solutions**

Against the background of what the Negro and white farm population has done and is doing to break through historical, geographic, occupational, racial, and class barriers, it may be interesting to mention briefly some of the proposed plans for solving the farm problem. Roughly they fall into two categories. One type envisages planning from the top down; that is, aiding those already in an advantageous position to prevent their dropping lower. Relief administered there is expected, of course, to trickle down to the lower classes and through a gradual process help all. Its natural corollary is planning for restriction of production, with attention centered upon profits instead of people and with control vested in the whimsies of the market rather than the scientific calculation of human needs. The other type has to do with planning from the bottom up and is predicated upon expansion rather than curtailment, upon the needs of the many rather than the wishes of the privileged few.

Interestingly enough, there are latent within the United States Department of Agriculture, the highest and most authoritative body in the country, the possibilities of developing both kinds of planning. Within certain bureaus, scientists are busy evaluating human needs and drawing up optimum standards of diet, etc., to produce healthy, efficient, and happy farm folk. What the nutrition experts set up as optimum standards the economists use as a measure to test America’s efficiency in supplying these needs. Their conclusion is that farmers, instead of having produced too much, should expand agricultural production by at least a third in order to give everyone the “liberal diet” necessary to maintain him in health and
vigor. Instead of the 1934 harvested crop acreage of 258,447,000, there should be at least 335,600,000. According to these scientists, almost twice as many dairy cattle, or 40,800,000 instead of 25,100,000 are needed. Hogs, in like manner, should be practically doubled, with 70,200,000 as opposed to the present inadequate 37,000,000. The 49,800,000 sheep and lambs on farms on January 1, 1935, should be increased to 68,300,000 and chickens from 454,600,000 to 627,300,000.15

It must seem strange to the De-

partment of Agriculture scientists, if they ever venture out of their laboratories into the domains of the practical destructionists and restrictionists, to hear such terms as “surplus” and “overproduction” used as guides to planning. The title of a recent pamphlet by the Secretary of Agriculture is, “America Must Choose”. The Department itself offers the choice between analysis that is scientific and realistic and analysis that is metaphysical; that is, devoted to defending traditional dogmas and systems. It offers the choice between planning for the stabilization of poverty and inequality and planning for the raising of economic and cultural standards for the mass of people, regardless of race.