African Americans, Impact of the Great Depression on

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The Great Depression brought mass suffering to all regions of the country. National income dropped by 50 percent and unemployment rose to an estimated 25 percent of the total labor force. At the same time, twenty million Americans turned to public and private relief agencies for assistance. As the "Last Hired and the First Fired," African Americans entered the Depression long before the stock market crash in 1929, and they stayed there longer than other Americans. By 1933, African Americans found it all but impossible to find jobs of any kind in agriculture or industry. As cotton prices dropped from eighteen cents per pound on the eve of the Depression to less that six cents per pound in 1933, some 12,000 black sharecroppers lost their precarious footing in southern agriculture and moved increasingly toward southern, northern, and western cities. Mechanical devices had already slowly reduced the number of workers required for plowing, hoeing, and weeding, but now planters also experimented with mechanical cotton pickers, which displaced even more black farm workers. Despite declining opportunities in cities, the proportion of blacks living in urban areas rose from 44 percent in 1930 to nearly 50 percent by the onset of World War II.

HARD TIMES AND RISE OF NEW DEAL FOR BLACKS

As the number of rural blacks seeking jobs in cities escalated, urban black workers experienced increasing difficulties. Black urban unemployment reached well over 50 percent, more than twice the rate of whites. In southern cities, white workers rallied around such slogans as, "No Jobs for Niggers Until Every White Man Has a Job" and "Niggers, back to the cotton fields—city jobs are for white folks." The most violent episodes took place on southern railroads, as unionized white workers and the railroad brotherhoods intimidated, attacked, and murdered black firemen in order to take their jobs. Nearly a dozen black firemen lost their jobs in various parts of the South. As one contemporary observer succinctly stated, "The shotgun, the whip, the noose, and Ku Klux Klan practices were being resumed in the certainty that dead men not only tell no tales, but create vacancies." For their part, in the North and South, black women were forced into the notorious Depression era "slave market," where even working-class white women employed black women at starvation wages, as little as $5 per week for full-time laborers in northern cities. In their studies of the market in Bronx, New York, two black women compared the practice to the treatment of slaves in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Despite mass suffering, the Republican administration of Herbert Hoover did little to aid the poor and destitute. Instead, the federal government established the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which relieved the credit problems of large banking, insurance, and industrial firms. Although Hoover believed that such policies would create new jobs, stimulate production, and increase consumer spending, benefits did not "trickle down" to the rest of the economy and end the Depression. Still, African Americans rallied to the slogan "Who but Hoover" in the presidential contest of 1932. In the
eyes of blacks, the Republican Party remained the party of emancipation, partly because Democratic candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt had embraced the segregationist policies of the Democratic Party.

Following his inauguration, Roosevelt's attitude toward African Americans changed little. He not only opposed vital civil rights legislation like the anti-lynching bill, designed to make lynching a federal offense, but showed little interest in challenging even the most blatant manifestations of racial injustice in the proliferation of New Deal agencies. The National Recovery Administration (NRA), Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), to name only a few, all failed to protect blacks against discriminatory employers, agency officials, and local whites.

When the AAA paid farmers to withdraw cotton lands from production, county officials barred African Americans from representation and deprived them of government checks. For their part, by exempting domestic service and unskilled labor from minimum wage and participatory provisions, the NRA and the social security programs eliminated
nearly 60 percent of African Americans from benefits. When the jobs of African Americans were brought under the provisions of the NRA in southern textile firms, employers reclassified such jobs and removed them from coverage of the higher wage code.

As they encountered various forms of discrimination in New Deal Agencies, many African Americans concluded that the so-called New Deal was indeed a "raw deal." Only during the mid-1930s would African Americans gain broader access to the New Deal social programs. By 1939, income from
New Deal work and relief programs nearly matched African-American income from private employment. African Americans occupied about one-third of all federal low-income housing projects, and gained a growing share of CCC jobs, Federal Farm Security loans, and benefits from WPA educational and cultural programs. African Americans now frequently hailed the New Deal as "a godsend." Some blacks even quipped that God "will lead me" and relief "will feed me."

The emergence of a "new deal" for blacks was closely intertwined with the growth of the Communist Party, the resurgence of organized labor, and the increasing political efforts of blacks on their own behalf. When the Communist Party helped save nine black youths, the Scottsboro Boys, from execution and secured the release of their own black comrade Angelo Herndon from a Georgia chain gang, the African-American community took notice. When the party helped to initiate hunger marches, unemployed councils, farm labor unions, rent strikes, and mass demonstrations to prevent the eviction of black families from their homes, its work gained even greater recognition within the African-American community. As one black newspaper editor, William Kelley of the Amsterdam News, reported, "The fight that they are putting up . . . strike[s] forcefully at the fundamental wrongs suffered by the Negro today."

The rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1935 facilitated the emergence of a
real New Deal for African Americans. Unlike the old American Federation of Labor (AFL), the CIO made a firm commitment to organize both black and white workers. The organization soon launched the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC), the United Automobile Workers (UAW), and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). The new unions appealed to civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League, recruited black organizers, and advocated an end to unequal pay scales for black and white workers. Although most AFL unions continued to exclude black workers, the national leadership gradually supported a more equitable stance toward black workers. The union finally approved an international charter for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) in 1935 and endorsed efforts to free the Scottsboro Boys and Angelo Herndon.

Following the lead of anthropologist Franz Boas and his associates, social scientists encouraged the lowering of racial barriers in American society. As early as the 1920s, they had gradually turned away from earlier biological definitions of race, which defined African Americans as innately inferior. The new social scientists challenged the biological determinists to "prove" that African Americans occupied a lower socioeconomic and political status in American society because of their hereditary inferiority. Legal change lagged significantly behind the new intellectual perspectives on race; yet, even
here, African Americans witnessed the slow transition to a new deal. As early as 1935, the Maryland Court of Appeals ordered the University of Maryland to admit blacks to the state's law school or set up a new separate and equal facility for blacks. Rather than face the expense of establishing a new all-black law school, university officials lowered racial barriers and admitted black students to the all-white institution.

COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Despite the rise of interracial alliances and the emergence of anti-racist movements among whites, African Americans developed their own strategies for social change and helped to create their own "new deal." African Americans cared for each other's children, offered emotional support, and creatively manipulated their family's resources. As one Georgia relief official noted, "These people are catching and selling fish, reselling vegetables, sewing in exchange for old clothes, letting out sleeping space, and doing odd jobs . . . Stoves are used in common, wash boilers go their rounds, and garden crops are exchanged and shared." Urban blacks also maintained vegetable gardens, staged rent parties, played the numbers game, and expanded their church-based social welfare activities. While rent parties provided "down home" food, drink, music, and a place to dance for a small admission fee, the "policy" or numbers game employed large numbers of African Americans as runners and as bookkeepers. According to some observers, for example, Chicago's south side employed seven thousand people in the numbers business and cushioned them from unemployment even as it provided hope for thousands of blacks seeking to make a "hit." For their part, some "numbers kings" provided donations to black churches and charitable organizations, but religious organizations launched their own social welfare activities. In addition to the work of established denominations, new religious movements also expanded their efforts to feed the poor. Started during the 1920s, for example, Father Divine's Peace Mission moved its headquarters from Sayville on Long Island to Harlem in 1932 and
gained credit for feeding the masses and offering relief from widespread destitution. At about the same time, Bishop Charles Emmanuel Grace, known as "Daddy Grace," founded the United House of Prayer of All People, opened offices in twenty cities, and offered thousands of people respite from suffering.

As African Americans used their community-based social networks and institutions to address their needs, they also turned toward the labor movement. Under the growing influence of the new CIO unions, African Americans expanded their place in the house of labor. Perhaps more than any other single figure, however, A. Philip Randolph epitomized the persistent struggle of black workers to organize in their own interests. Born in Crescent City, Florida, in 1889, Randolph had migrated to New York City in 1911 and spearheaded the formation of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids in 1925. When New Deal federal legislation (the Railway Labor Act of 1934) legitimized the rights of workers to organize, Randolph and the BSCP intensified its organizing drive among black porters. By 1933, the union represented some 35,000 porters. Two years later, the union defeated a company union and won the right to represent porters at the bargaining table with management, which signed its first contract with the union in 1937. The BSCP victory not only helped to make African Americans more union conscious, but increased their impact on national labor policy.

The NAACP, Urban League, and other civil rights organizations also increased their focus on the economic plight of African Americans. In 1933, these organizations formed the Joint Committee on National Recovery (JCNR) and helped to publicize the racial inequities in New Deal programs. African Americans also launched the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign in New York, Chicago, Washington, D. C., and other cities. They boycotted white merchants who served the African-American community but refused to employ blacks except in domestic and common laborer positions. When Harlem store owners refused to negotiate, New York blacks formed the Citizens League for Fair Play and set up pickets around Blumstein's Department Store. In 1938, their actions produced concrete results when the New York Uptown Chamber of Commerce and the Greater New York Coordinating Committee for Employment agreed to give African Americans one-third of all new retail executive, clerical, and sales jobs.

African Americans usually expressed their grievances through organized and peaceful action, but sometimes they despaired and turned to violence. Racial violence erupted in Harlem in 1935 when a rumor spread that a black youth had been brutally attacked and killed by police. Although the rumor proved false, African-American crowds soon gathered and smashed buildings and looted stores in a night of violence that left one person dead, over fifty injured, and thousands of dollars in property damage. Some blacks believed that radicalism offered the most appropriate response to the deepening crisis of African Americans. Some African Americans joined the Socialist Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) and the Communist Alabama Sharecroppers Union. Nate Shaw (Ned Cobb), whose life became the subject of an oral biography, recalled that he had joined the sharecroppers union to fight the system that oppressed him. Shaw later recalled that he had to act because he had labored "under many rulins, just like the other Negro, that I knowed was injurious to man and displeasin to God and still I had to fall back." In Birmingham, the Communist Party's League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR) and its energetic fight on behalf of the Scottsboro Boys also attracted unemployed workers, such as Al Murphy and Hosea Hudson. As Hudson put it, "I always did resent injustice and the way they used to treat Negroes....My grandmother used to talk about these things. She was very militant herself, you know."
BLACKS AND THE NEW DEAL COALITION

Although some blacks joined radical social movements and parties, most worked hard to broaden their participation in the New Deal coalition. As Republicans continued to take black votes for granted, blacks increasingly turned toward the northern wing of the Democratic Party. As early as 1932, the editor of the black weekly Pittsburgh Courier had urged African Americans to change their political affiliation: "My friends, go turn Lincoln’s picture to the wall . . . that debt has been paid in full." By the mid-1930s, nearly forty-five blacks had received appointments to New Deal agencies. Referred to as the Black Cabinet, these black advisors included Robert L. Vann, editor of the Pittsburgh Courier, Robert C. Weaver, an economist, and Mary McCleod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College in Florida. In 1936, African Americans formed the National Negro Congress (NNC), which aimed to unite all existing political, fraternal, and religious organizations and push for policies designed to bring about the full socioeconomic recovery of the black community. Spearheaded by Ralph Bunche, a professor of political science at Howard University in Washington, D.C, and John Davis, executive secretary of the Joint Committee on National Recovery, the founding meeting of the NNC brought together some six hundred organizations and selected A. Philip Randolph as its first president. The NNC symbolized as well as promoted the growing political mobilization of the African-American community. In the presidential election of 1936, African Americans voted for the Democratic Party in record numbers; Roosevelt received 76 percent of northern black votes.

After the election of 1936, African Americans intensified demands on Roosevelt's New Deal administration. They placed justice before the law high on their list of priorities. As early as 1933, the NAACP organized a Writers League Against Lynching and intensified its national movement for a federal anti-lynching law. The Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill gained little support from Roosevelt and failed when southern senators filibustered the measure in 1934, 1935, 1937, 1938, and 1940. Despite failure to pass a federal anti-lynching law, partly because of the campaign, the number of recorded lynchings dropped from eighteen in 1935 to two in 1939.

During the 1930s, black attorneys like Charles Hamilton Houston and William Hastie assaulted the legal supports of Jim Crow, while black historians, social scientists, and writers challenged its intellectual underpinnings. Under the leadership of historian Carter G. Woodson, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (founded in 1915) continued to promote the study of African-American history, emphasizing the role of blacks in the development of the nation. African-American intellectuals (e.g., E. Franklin Frazier, W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright) reinforced the work of Carter G. Woodson.

As suggested by the role of black intellectuals and attorneys on the one hand and the rent parties of poor and working-class blacks on the other, African-American responses to poverty were by no means uniform. They varied across class, gender, and generational lines. Women manipulated household resources, while black men predominated in the organized labor and civil rights movements. Moreover, elite men dominated the leadership positions of civil rights and social service organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League. Yet, African Americans during the period were united through a common history, color, and culture. The emergence of Joe Louis as a folk hero symbolized African Americans' sense of common plight, kinship, and future. The exploits of Louis helped to unify African Americans and gave them hope that they could demolish the segregationist system. When Joe Louis lost, African Americans lamented, as in his first fight with the German Max Schmeling, who symbolized Adolf Hitler's doctrine of Aryan supremacy. When Louis knocked out Max Schmeling in the first round of
their rematch, black people celebrated. The singer Lena Horne later recalled that Joe Louis "was the one invincible Negro, the one who stood up to the white man and beat him down with his fists. He in a sense carried so many of our hopes, maybe even dreams of vengeance."

Despite the transition from a raw deal to a new deal between 1935 and 1939, the persistence of racial discrimination within and outside governmental agencies limited the achievements of the Roosevelt administration. As whites returned to full-time employment during the late 1930s, African Americans remained dependent on public service and relief programs. While the CIO aided blacks who were fortunate enough to maintain or regain their jobs during the Depression years, it did little to enhance the equitable reemployment of black and white workers as the country slowly pulled itself out of the Depression. The Communist Party helped to change attitudes toward racial unity, but the benefits of such changes were largely symbolic as racial injustice continued to undermine the material position of African Americans. As the nation increasingly mobilized for War after 1939, African Americans resolved that World War II would be fought on two fronts. They wanted a "Double-V," victory at home and victory abroad.

See Also: AMERICAN NEGRO LABOR CONGRESS (ANLC); BLACK CABINET; BLACK METROPOLIS; BROTHERHOOD OF SLEEPING CAR PORTERS (BSCP); LYNCHINGS; NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE (NAACP); NATIONAL NEGRO CONGRESS; SCOTTSBORO CASE.

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