

History of Slavery: Reversing Reconstruction, the Rise of Tenant Agriculture and the Great Migration

Millions of formerly enslaved Africans were forced into sharecropping, peonage and racial subservience after the Compromise of 1876

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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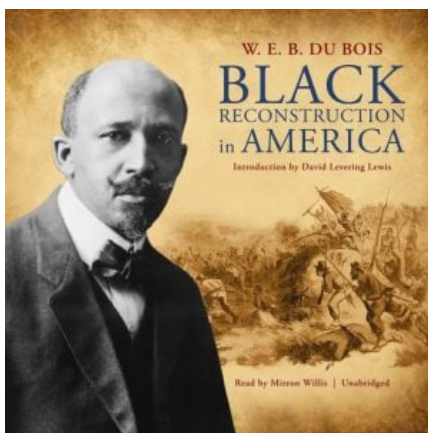
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After the defeat of the Confederacy in April 1865, the central question for a post-civil war structure of governance revolved around the status of the more than four million people of African descent.

As the document cited below makes clear, even President Abraham Lincoln, some one year after the beginning of the civil war remained a proponent of the government-sponsored migration of Africans from the continental United States.



“By an act of April 16, 1862, which abolished slavery in the District of Columbia, Congress made an appropriation of \$100,000 for voluntary Negro emigrants at an expense of \$100 each; and later, July 16, an additional appropriation of \$500,000 was made at Lincoln's request. The President was authorized 'to make provision for transportation, colonization, and settlement, in some tropical country beyond the limits of the United States, of such persons of the African race, made free by the provisions of this act, as may be willing to emigrate, having first obtained the consent of the government of said country to their protection and settlement within the same, with all the rights and privileges of freemen.'”

Quote taken from Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois' "Black Reconstruction in America" in the chapter entitled "Looking Backward" (<http://ouleft.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/blackreconstruction.pdf>)

In 1816, the Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America, later known after 1837 as the American Colonization Society (ACS), was formed with the expressed intent of cleansing the U.S. of free Africans. In 1847, the West African state of the Republic of Liberia was founded with expatriates from the U.S. as the dominant political grouping within the government. Liberia, as well as Sierra Leone, which was founded by the British after the American War of Independence during the late 18th century, were designed as solutions to the race question in North America and the United Kingdom.

Although there are revisionists who claimed that the civil war fought between 1861-1865 was not inevitable and was waged over "states' rights" and "regional sovereignty," if this was in fact the case, then there would have been no need for the Fugitive Slave Acts during the antebellum period and the establishment of legalized segregation after the collapse of Reconstruction.

Moreover, no serious student of the historical trajectory of the U.S. during the 19th century can deny the pivotal role of African labor in the overall economic development of the country. After the invention and deployment of the cotton gin, the production of this commodity would provide the raw materials for the expansion of the textile and other industries which characterized modern day capitalism.

The planters sought to maintain a stranglehold on Black labor in the wake of their failed attempt at secession. Therefore, despite the insurrectionist effort to either build a sustainable separate slave state or destroy the Union, the Confederates wanted to reenter the U.S. by reasserting their political and economic authority irrespective of the rights of the emancipated Africans.

Nonetheless, there were others including the Radical Republicans in Congress who realized that unless the slavocracy was fully disarmed, disenfranchised and monitored until a bourgeois democratic dispensation could be enacted, the stability of the Union could not be guaranteed. As a result of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution and several Civil Rights Acts, a small number of African Americans were elected to the Senate, the House of Representatives, state legislative offices as well as local municipalities between the late 1860s and the conclusion of the 19th century.

Resistance to the formation of a democratic state which included the rights of African people continued after the assassination of Lincoln and the ascendancy of his vice presidential successor President Andrew Johnson. Although Johnson, who came from the slaveholding state of Tennessee, had rejected secession, he opposed the disempowerment of the planters and the most important policies of the Reconstruction era.

Johnson was the first U.S. president to be impeached in 1868 by the House of Representatives. However, the Senate failed by a narrow margin to convict him. The contentious atmosphere which prevailed in Congress during 1868 prefigured the eventual collapse of the Reconstruction process after the elections of 1876. By the following year, a compromise between the dominant political forces in the U.S. sealed the continuation of the national oppression of the African people.

Tenant Agriculture and Racial Terror

There were several factors involved in the overthrow of Reconstruction. One of the most important was that the Black Union soldiers and state militias, empowered by the U.S. government during and immediately after the civil war, were systematically disbanded in the South. African Americans with arms and the right to the franchise was a threat to the

supremacy of the planters and their allies after the war.

In Memphis during early May 1866, white mobs made up of police officers, former Confederate soldiers and racist sympathizers attacked the African American community. They robbed, assaulted, raped and murdered until the state authorities called for the restoration of civil order.



These episodes of racial terror were widespread throughout the South and other regions of the U.S. during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Underlying the enactment of Jim Crow laws was the economic exploitation of the formerly enslaved people through tenant agriculture, widely known as sharecropping. Forced labor was also utilized through the criminal justice system by sentencing African Americans to prison terms where they were required to perform labor without compensation.

The 13th Amendment to the Constitution ostensibly freed the enslaved Africans yet upheld the legalization of involuntary servitude within penal institutions. Both sharecropping and peonage became indistinguishable due to the complete dictatorship of the landowners during the post-civil war period.

V.I. Lenin, the co-founder of the Russian Communist Party and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), some two years prior to the Revolution of October 1917, published a study on southern agriculture. In his report he noted the near slave-like conditions that African Americans were still enduring a half century since emancipation.

[In 1915, Lenin noted that:](#)

“In 1910, free, republican-democratic America had 1,500,000 sharecroppers, of whom more than 1,000,000 were Negroes. And the proportion of share-croppers to the total number of farmers is not decreasing, but is on the contrary steadily and rather rapidly increasing. In 1880, 17.5% of the farmers in the U.S.A. were sharecroppers, in 1890, 18.4%; in 1900, 22.2%; and in 1910, 24%.... For the ‘emancipated’ Negroes, the American South is a kind of prison where they are hemmed in, isolated and deprived of fresh air.... Thus it turns out that there is a startling similarity in the economic status of the Negroes in America and the peasants in the heart of agricultural Russia who ‘were formerly landowners’ serfs’.”

Flight as a Form of Resistance to National Oppression

Migration among African Americans became a form of resistance during and after the antebellum period. Many Africans voluntarily migrated to Liberia believing that there was no potential for achieving a quality life inside the U.S.

During the period of the 1880s to the early decades of the 20th century, many African



Americans migrated to the western states of Kansas and Oklahoma. Nonetheless, the most notable outmigration from the South came with the rapid growth of industrial capitalist production largely centered in Northern cities during the first half of the 20th century.

Even prior to World War I, Ford Motor Company began to recruit African Americans from the rural South with promises of \$5 per day salaries, oftentimes a tenfold increase in their daily allotments from working in the cotton fields and households of the white ruling class. World War II prompted even more outmigration from the South creating the conditions during the 1950s to the 1970s for the rise of a new sense of political empowerment.

Lenin, in the same above-mentioned study says:

“Negroes are in full flight from the two Southern divisions where there is no homesteading: in the 10 years between the last two censuses, these two divisions provided other parts of the country with almost 600,000 “Black” people. The Negroes flee mainly to the towns: in the South, 77 to 80% of all the Negroes live in rural communities; in other areas, only 8 to 32%. Thus, it turns out that there is a startling similarity in the economic status of the Negroes in America and the peasants in the heart of agricultural Russia who were formerly landowners’ serfs.”

However, after arriving in large numbers in the northeastern, midwestern and western states, African Americans were still subjected to de jure and de facto segregation. African American labor was super-exploited in the factories and steel mills while deliberate governmental policy forced them into substandard housing, educational and other public facilities.

These social problems and forms of national oppression remain well into the 21st century. The necessity for a revolutionary transformation of racial capitalism continues as an imperative of the African American people in their quest for full social equality and national liberation.

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