**African American experiences post emancipation and the ultimate goal of self-determination**

By Aaron Jura

The decades following emancipation resulted in extreme hardship for the majority of African Americans living in the United States. The African American community in the Southern United States was particularly hard hit by racial violence and disenfranchising public policies designed to curtail any potential freedoms granted to them through the proclamation. Black Americans found ways to cope with these governmental and societal impositions to their new “freedom,” and leaders began to emerge with differing viewpoints on the future of the African American race in the United States. Both men and women within the African American community suffered under the strict environment implemented under Jim Crow. The legal roadblocks put in place in the South had a massive impact on the changing role of the woman in the African American household. This placed both men’s and women’s voices in the debate over freedom and the fundamental right of self-determination within the African American community.

The African American community was beginning to try to find their way after years of traditional slavery ended with emancipation. Nearly 7 million newly freed African Americans were left to grapple with the realities of the world post emancipation (Blair, 2000, p. 3). The vast majority of blacks made their homes in the Southern United States and worked in the agricultural field (Blair, 2000, p. 3). Many African Americans remained toiling in Southern fields following emancipation, and the subsequent sharecropping arrangements further depressed those within the community. The black population had continually been injured by the white elites in many areas, but particularly within the labor field. Newspaper accounts from the period report on the “tyranny of [the] caste [system]” and highlight the challenges faced by African Americans in their attempts to enter the industrial workforce (Manning Marable, 2002, p. 133). In industrial roles blacks were often only allowed to perform unskilled labor roles, and were paid a fraction of that of the unskilled white laborer population. Opportunities were also limited severely by whites who controlled employment in industrial jobs in both the South and the North. Industrial opportunities, for blacks, within the cities were typically only available in extremely low paid positions that were often unskilled and dangerous (Blair, 2000, p. 11). While early in the post emancipation period black workers were commonplace in Southern cities; by the late 1800’s black workers in skilled labor positions were much more rare (Blair, 2000, p. 13).

African Americans, like any other large community, had a variety of reasons for staying in the South in the years immediately preceding emancipation. For the majority of African Americans, the fields of agricultural labor were all they had known and the South offered the property and conditions needed to continue to work in the fields. Sharecropping arrangements benefited whites and kept Southern black families indebted to white landowners making it both difficult and dangerous to overcome for the purpose of potential relocation (Blair, 2000, p. 4). Sharecropping within the African American tenant farmer communities of the South left many indebted to white landowners and shopkeepers and therefore unable to get to a financial level necessary whereby anything but their existence in the South could become a reality. Most black citizens were not formally educated and hardly any owned land – a prerequisite for power and authority.

While it would seem that the opportunities would be boundless for the newly free, the reality was that most African Americans could not financially afford to buy themselves and their families’ passage anywhere outside of the South (Blair, 2000, p. 6). A potentially more achievable opportunity existed with the advent of westward expansion. In an effort to realize the dreams of self-determination a small few, mostly middle class, African Americans were able to achieve land ownership out West (Blair, 2000, p. 8). The influx of newly settled African Americans resulted in the establishment of “twenty-five black communities [founded] in the Oklahoma Region” (Blair, 2000, p. 7). While these small communities in Oklahoma and ultimately some West African colonies provide some element of self-determination within the African American community the vast majority of those living in the United States remained disenfranchised.

Frederick Douglass’ essay illustrates the major issues that African Americans wanted resolved in the years following emancipation. Douglass argues that freedom is “… the right to choose one’s own employment.” (Douglass, p. 123) Douglass states that by determining what, when, and for how much one will work makes a mockery of emancipation (Douglass, p. 123). Douglass also was not a supporter of migration as a means of achieving the right to self-determination. In his writings and speeches he has called Colonialization Society’s aim as, “next to slavery ...the deadliest foe of the colored man” (Douglass). Douglass’ critique of migration plans was based upon the idea that by separating the black man from American society groups like this were preaching, “that neither knowledge, temperance, patience, faith nor virtue can avail him anything in this land.” This message was fundamentally opposed to Douglass’ support of advancement of the “immediate, unconditional, and universal enfranchisement of the black man in every state in the union” (Douglass, p. 123).

As skilled, well paid positions became much rarer for African American men during the years following emancipation the role of the woman in the household became much more important. Women were also restricted in the type of work they did outside of the home. The vast majority of women worked as household staff to wealthy white elites. The needs of the families that employed black workers were so cumbersome that this provided limitations on the family structure available to poor working African Americans (Blair, 2000, p. 12). Furthermore, the limitations on good paying positions for men often left the males of the household traveling for work and therefore away from the home (Blair, 2000, p. 12). These limitations reduced the options that would have been considered feasible by a struggling African American family in the post emancipation years.

While most industries were closed to African American employment there were some exceptions to this general rule. By the late 1800’s mining careers represented an area of opportunity for African Americans who had been long disenfranchised in employment. Miner unions, such as the Knights of Labor and United Mine Workers, eventually offered membership to African Americans working in the mining field. The organization of the labor unions gave increased legitimacy to the African Americans working in the mines. By the late 1800’s blacks like Richard L. Davis had become a force within the union organization. Powerful voices, like that of Davis, eventually result in gains for African Americans in employment, with standard wages offered for union members regardless of their race.

The rise of the African American women’s voice is also highly present throughout the period. The washerwoman’s strike of 1881 illustrates the rising power of the female voice in the debate over self-determination. Frustrated with the low wages paid to them the washerwomen of Atlanta went on strike demanding that all members of the collective were paid at a standard and pre-negotiated rate (Blair, 2000, p. 15). Black female scholars of the period also highlighted the role women must take in the debate over free will. Anna Julia Cooper says a woman’s strength is needed to combat the “gain and greed and grasping selfishness” prevalent in a “money getting, dollar worshiping civilization” (Cooper, 2002, p. 160). Cooper goes on to argue that the women’s “sentiments must strike the keynote and give the dominant tone” (Cooper, 2002, p. 160). The strong rhetoric of Cooper illustrates the importance of the female voice in the debate about self-determination within the African American community.

Considering the changing nature of the African American family structure during this period the voice of African American women didn’t only become more distinct – it also became more powerful. Survey’s conducted in Philadelphia indicate that in the late 1800’s “57% of black women and 48.7% of black men were single” (Blair, 2000, p. 13). In the cities, “twice as many urban as rural black households were headed by a woman alone” (Blair, 2000, p. 13). The unique challenges in seeking and retaining employment in cities often-left African Americans forced to settle down and have children later in life if at all. This was a challenge unique to cities. Considering the limitations on space and employment in urban centers the options to marry, have children, and live as a housewife were virtually non-existent within the community of African Americans seeking opportunity in cities around the United States.

Violence often plagued the black communities of both the North and South during this period. Physical violence and murder were commonplace and African Americans were targets for white violence against them due to their race. Ida B. Wells cataloged and reported on incidents of violence against those in the African American community; drawing attention to the issues facing the black community following emancipation. The campaign of fear outlined by Wells in her studies about lynching paint a picture of a violent mob scene that had, at that time, resulted over 3,200 dead men, women, and children in a quarter of a century (Wells, 2002, p. 192). Wells calls out the “hypocrisy of the lyncher” arguing that the “cowardly lyncher revels in murder” while hiding behind the claim of protecting womanhood (Wells, 2002, p. 193). Wells argues that the problem of lynching has spread far beyond the original regional nature of the problem to that of a national one (Wells, 2002, p. 194).

While African Americans faced troubles from different sides during the years after emancipation the opportunity of education was one way that leaders argued would ultimately result in gains for the community at large. Booker T. Washington’s vision, manifested in Tuskegee, Alabama, would ultimately result in a shift from the importance of “civil rights and racial equality in favor of economic development” (Manning Marable, 2002, p. 174). Washington places an emphasis in agricultural and vocational education during the time of Jim Crow as opposed to the full and immediate enfranchisement to which Douglass had previously supported. Washington’s ability to connect with white audiences with a much more conciliatory tone continued to resonate in decades to come. Through vocational and agricultural education, Washington and other leaders argued, African Americans would be better positioned to sustain their own communities and provide for the common good of all. While Washington’s aim is admirable and he did gain considerable political capital during the period he is often criticized for seemingly abandoning the ultimate goal of most for full and immediate enfranchisement.

The years after the emancipation proclamation provided freedom for the nearly 7 million newly freed African Americans residing in the United States proved to be extremely taxing, difficult, and dangerous. Plagued by violence and political and societal unjustness the greater African American community remained somewhat stagnant in the years following their freedom. The playing field was anything but level and the newly freed members of this new African American community were left debating what their ultimate path would be. While education and pockets of opportunity did pop up around the United States the vast majority of African Americans during the period lived in poverty. Newly established educational opportunities did exist, but were still not entirely accessible by the African American community at large. Internal debates and power struggles over the vision of the future of this new community of individuals resulted in some physical migrations of people; however, the economic conditions of the time ultimately provided roadblocks to most in achieving the ultimate goal of self-determination.

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