What caused the Great Migrations?

**Viewpoint:** The Great Migrations of African Americans from the rural South to the industrial North was the result of economic changes over which they had little control.

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One of the most significant demographic events of the twentieth century was the migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban, industrial North. What caused this mass movement of people? In these two essays, Elizabeth D. Schafer, an agricultural historian, and Christopher W. Schmidt, an historian of African American culture, take two different approaches to this phenomenon. Schafer sees the Great Migration as part of a larger economic shift, in which the United States as a whole was transformed from a rural nation to an urban nation. As historian Richard Hofstadter once put it, “The United States was born in the country and moved to the city.” Changing economic conditions pushed people from the countryside and pulled them into cities, and it is not surprising that African Americans, among the most rural of Americans, were part of this large trend.

Schafer takes a macro approach to the phenomenon, looking at large economic forces which propelled large numbers of people to act. Schmidt, on the other hand, looks at individual players and actors. In his view, the decisions of millions of individuals must be taken into account in order to tell the larger story. History is not the work of impersonal economic forces, but rather is the action of men and women who make decisions. The Great Migration was the result of many small migrations.

How one analyzes the Great Migration, as the result of impersonal economic forces or as the outcome of many personal choices, says much about how one approaches the study of history. On the one hand, if one believes men and women respond to economic forces over which they have little control, then one would see the Great Migration as a phenomenon that drove millions of men, women, and children from the rural South to the urban North. If, on the other hand, one believes that history is made by people making choices, then one will see this economic transformation as the result of their choices, rather than as the force that made them choose.

Are men and women the creators of history, or are we merely its tools? How this question is answered, perhaps, will have less importance to our study of history than it will to our lives as citizens.
**Viewpoint:**

The Great Migrations of African Americans from the rural South to the industrial North was the result of economic changes over which they had little control.

Mass migrations of African Americans occurred several times during the first half of the twentieth century. The first “Great Migration,” as the en masse movement of African Americans was called, peaked during World War I. Historians have debated the causes of the Great Migration since it began. Scholars analyzing the migration at the time that it occurred attributed the exodus from south to north (as well as to midwestern cities) as economically generated. Through the 1930s, historians, economists, and sociologists provided evidence they thought proved that African Americans living in the rural South encountered impoverishing economic conditions that were beyond their control, pushing them from the land. Meanwhile, industrialized areas of the urban North were experiencing labor shortages and intensified demand for their finished goods, pulling African Americans northward to jobs and the promise of economic stability. Equating money with power, African Americans believed migration would secure full citizenship rights they were denied in the South.

Early proponents of the economic causation of the Great Migration encompassed employees of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Division of Negro Economics and scholars Emmett J. Scott, George E. Haynes, Edward E. Lewis, and Thomas J. Wooster. Other scholars in the following decades also focused on economic aspects of the Great Migration, supplementing that information with additional insights on the discrimination and violence that contributed to blacks choosing to move within the United States. St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton reiterated the economic theory two decades after the first migration. Later defenders of the economic theory included Robert Higgs and William E. Vickery in the 1960s and 1970s who compared southern and northern economies, quantifying their data to stress the economic motivations that resulted in creating America’s black industrial working class. By the 1990s, Earl Lewis, Joe William Trotter Jr., and Nell Irvin Painter recognized migrants’ economic incentives while analyzing other concerns.

Mobility symbolized freedom to blacks who had been enslaved prior to the end of the Civil War or were aware how previous generations were restricted to specific geographical places. Antebellum African Americans secretly migrated north along the Underground Railroad, considering the northern states as potential sanctuaries from slavery. During the Civil War, blacks followed Union troops, escaping from their owners’ land. After the war, emancipated African Americans desired to leave places where they had been slaves; many perceived the North as offering economic and social opportunities they had been denied in the South. Some individuals who saved enough money to travel or somehow secured transportation moved north. Other African Americans remained in the South because of familial ties and the inability to afford moving expenses. Agricultural sharecropping and tenancy systems also bound many African Americans to southern farmland. Blacks believed that land ownership would improve their stature financially, as well as socially within their community, and they saved whatever they could for future land purchases. Depressed markets, however, caused agricultural losses, and most African American sharecroppers labored in a cycle of continual indebtedness to their landlords. Although some blacks attained land of their own, most toiled on borrowed acres. Suffering extreme poverty, blacks dreamed of securing a better life for themselves and future generations.

When World War I began, the United States limited immigration, especially from European nations, the populations of which had comprised much of the northern industrial workforce. Before the war, more immigrants had arrived in America each year than the total population of African Americans in the northern states. The war created increased contracts with American manufacturers for military goods ordered by both domestic buyers and foreign allies. While demand for products soared, the number of workers declined because men enlisted for military service and fewer immigrants settled from abroad. Northern factories and industries that had relied on immigrant laborers began seeking American employees, even stating they would hire indiscriminately of gender and race. Companies sent labor agents to the South to recruit workers, assuring blacks of financial incentives to migrate. The availability of jobs in meat packing plants, automobile manufacturing companies, coal mines, and steel factories paying good wages spread by word of mouth, newspaper advertisements and articles, and letters sent by previous migrants and relatives in the North. Former southerners visited their hometowns, wearing fancy clothes and driving expensive cars. They passed around their pay stubs to show how much they earned. Not only were African Americans promised more money than agricultural positions paid, but they also were told they would enjoy better working and living conditions, as well as be treated equitably.
An African American family after their arrival in Chicago, ca. 1922
(Papers of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, Illinois State Archives, Springfield)

An African American family after their arrival in Chicago, ca. 1922
(Papers of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, Illinois State Archives, Springfield)

and humanely. They also were informed that they could learn skills such as shipbuilding. Railroad routes were accessible throughout the South to northern destinations, easing transportation concerns. Migrants many times chose new geographical alliances based on where they thought they would economically benefit the most.

Frustrated by a stagnant southern economy, many blacks impulsively migrated, leaving their jobs, friends, and even family behind in a frenzy that somewhat resembled the Gold Rush fever almost a century earlier. “In the first communities visited by the representatives of northern capital, their offers created unprecedented commotion,” historian Scott writes in *Negro Migration During the War* (1920). “Drivers and teamsters left their wagons standing in the street. Workers, returning home, scrambled aboard the trains for the North without notifying their employers or their families.” Between 1916 and 1919 half a million blacks migrated from the South. Another million moved north in the 1920s. New York City’s African American community grew from 91,709 people in 1910 to 152,467 one decade later. During the same period, Chicago’s black population expanded from 44,103 to 109,458 and Detroit’s black citizenry increased from 5,741 to 40,838. White southerners blamed labor agents for the loss of cheap labor and passed anti-enticement laws that required such agents pay hundreds of dollars for a license or risk fines and imprisonment. Agents seeking workers had to purchase costly state, county, and city permits. Southern blacks, however, already desired to move to the “Promised Land,” as they called the North, and relied on agents more to assist their migration than to convince them to leave.

Scholars promoting the economic theory as the catalyst for the Great Migration stress that economic changes in the South and North facilitated the movement. Blacks increasingly realized that achieving land ownership was difficult. They had hoped that becoming property owners would enable them to become independent in the South. Disillusioned by financial limitations, African Americans often expressed that they were interested in “bettering my condition.” They optimistically thought the North would provide them economic power and remove racial barriers, and believed that blacks would finally
secure full citizenship fifty years after the Thirteenth Amendment was passed.

The World War I economic boom coincided with catastrophic damage to southern agriculture. Boll weevils invaded the Deep South from Mexico, destroying cotton crops. Most southern farmers refused to diversify, relying on growing cotton as the single crop. Blacks suffered financial losses as prices dropped, as they were held accountable not only for their portion of the crop but also the landlord’s share. Many black farmers declared bankruptcy. Fewer agricultural employees were needed, and black sharecroppers were often evicted. Soil erosion and exhaustion also devastated southern agriculture, and as a result, interest rates became too high and credit was difficult to obtain. The South also endured droughts and floods during this period.

The unstable agricultural economy fueled desperation. Black southerners sought other work, cutting lumber at sawmills, extracting turpentine, cooking, and cleaning. Dissatisfied by low wages, blacks, especially younger African Americans, found northern employment appealing. Historian Carter G. Woodson, writing *A Century of Negro Migration* (1918) soon after the first wave of migration, stressed that economic motivations—not racial threats—caused migrants to move. He argued that racial violence had permeated southern society since the colonial era and that it had not been the primary reason for migration, because blacks had chosen to stay until economic factors convinced them to move. Contemporaries, both white and black, also viewed economic inducements as reasons for the Great Migration. James R. Grossman, in *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (1989), reported some examples of economic factors. For instance, the Montgomery (Alabama) Advertiser remarked “it’s plain as the noonday sun the Negro is leaving this country for higher wages.” A Georgia man explained that “the reason why I want to come north is why that the people dont pay enough for the labor that a man can do down here [sic].” A South Carolina laborer agreed: “There is no work here that pays a man to stay here.”

Economic historians stress that African Americans comprehended the contrasting characteristics of South and North, rural and urban, poverty and wealth. In 1916 a black laborer in Chicago earned an average of $2.50 daily, sometimes more, which was one week’s wages in the South. Of course, the larger salaries were necessary to offset higher living costs. The *Houston Observer*, a black newspaper, said that the African American “is underpaid, and in some instances when he asks for pay receives a 2 x 4 over his head. These are facts.” Discussing economic pressures that blacks faced, the periodical concluded “When such conditions are placed and forced upon a people and no protest is offered, you cannot blame a race of people for migrating.” A Greenville, Mississippi, migrant commented “I want to get my famely [sic] out of this cursed south land down here a negro man is not good as a white mans dog.”

James B. Dillard, a U.S. Department of Labor representative, declared “whatever concurrent causes may have operated all will agree” that “better wages offered by the North have been the immediate occasion for the exodus.” Department of Labor writers followed the orders of President Woodrow Wilson’s administrators in emphasizing the economic causes of the Great Migration, because of the temporary wartime need for defense workers. Wilson wanted the migrants to return to the South after the war and thus demanded that discussion of other factors, such as racial violence that might be reasons for permanent relocation, be minimized.

Frequently, blacks moved first to a southern city where economic conditions were better than their rural community. Interregional migration provided autonomy for individuals who learned skills and gained confidence in their abilities. They met like-minded people with common economic, political, and social concerns. After saving money for train tickets, some of these migrants moved farther north, seeking greater fortunes. Painter emphasizes in an article in *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, & Gender* (1991), edited by Trotter, that “These were voluntary movements, initiated by the individual or the family, in pursuit of what they saw as their own best interests.” Additional waves of migrants occurred as New Deal programs resulted in more black agricultural laborers being displaced from southern land through federal orders to plow up land, reduce planting, and adopt mechanization. Blacks sought relief from miserable, unfair conditions and competition with whites for a limited amount of jobs. Black and white migrants moved westward, searching for economic opportunities by harvesting fields and extracting valuable minerals and oil from land and oceans. Urban migration continued during peacetime years, increasing when World War II began. African Americans flocked to urban areas in the South, and along the Atlantic and West Coasts as well as the Mississippi Valley, to fill defense jobs. Blacks sometimes had the opportunity to perform jobs that they had been previously excluded from in favor of white employees. From 1940 to 1970 approximately five million African Americans moved from the South to the North.

Many migrants did not find all they hoped for in the North. Reality exposed that the North was not the paradise migrants perceived nor the
fabled opposite of the South. The jobs that blacks accepted were often menial or short-term; migrants occasionally encountered discrimination and were often exploited and paid low wages. Racial riots resulted from conflicts with northern residents who were not as tolerant of minorities as blacks had been told. African American workers often remained on the periphery of work situations, having little say in procedures. When war veterans returned home, black workers were the first fired. Yet, northern migrants benefited from voting rights, and the large concentrations of blacks in cities, among other reasons, prompted the federal government to pursue civil-rights legislation to appease these influential political blocs. The dreams of the Great Migration dissipated as poverty plagued many migrants and their descendants, who relied on public assistance and lived in federally funded housing. Chronicling the migrants’ experiences, the Smithsonian Institution sponsored an exhibition titled “Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration, 1915–1940,” that moved around the country much like the migrants. The Great Migration, according to economic interpretations, began as blacks sought more choices, transferring aspects of southern culture to the North where some prospered, others broke even, and many endured perpetuated forms of segregation and economic discrimination.

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Viewpoint:
A close examination of the Great Migrations reveals a complex and diverse story of men and women making decisions based on personal considerations.

At first glance the history of the Great Black Migration is a rather simple story. Between World War I and 1970 more than six million African Americans abandoned the rural South for the cities of the North. The main factors for this movement were the declining southern farming economy coupled with a booming industry in the North; the expanded wartime industrial economy (which continued to expand well past World War II), along with restricted immigration during the war years, created labor shortages that northern industrialists were eager to fill with cheap labor. A closer look at the individuals who were part of this movement reveals a story much more complex and rich than bare numbers and economic factors. Those people who made the decision to pick up their lives in the South were not mere pawns pushed by impersonal forces, but human actors who weighed options, shared concerns, and helped family and friends in their decisions and journeys. To understand the Great Migration one must comprehend not only the numbers but also the personal stories, for it is these that tell the complex reality of one of the major events of the twentieth century.

An excellent example of this style of migration story is that of Ruby Daniels, as told by Nicholas Lemann in The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America (1991). In the early 1940s Daniels was a field hand in Mississippi, recently divorced, with two children fathered by a married man, when she faced the idea of heading north. Since her birth in 1916 she had moved often. When she was an infant her family left their small farm in eastern Mississippi for work sharecropping on a cotton plantation in the Mississippi Delta, where they, like most black sharecroppers in the South, had to live through the daily struggles of segregation and economic exploitation, working long hours in the heat for subsistence wages. By age twelve Ruby had already lived on many plantations and begun working in the fields. She eventually married and moved with her husband to Clarksdale, Mississippi, to work for the Works Progress Administration, a federal work-relief program. But after she divorced she had little to hold her to Mississippi, and the reports from her aunt in Chicago were promising. In 1946 she made the move. She soon returned to Clarksdale to marry the father of her children, but the marriage did not work out and before long she was back in Chicago. She lived with her aunt in the black section of the city, working as a janitor, then as a laundress. With the birth of more children she began to live on public aid. She eventually moved into an apartment in the newly constructed low-rent Robert Taylor Homes, where she struggled to protect her children from poverty and violence that was becoming endemic to black Chicago. Later in life Ruby returned full-circle to Clarksdale, where she moved into a comfortable apartment, becoming one of a growing number of northern African Americans who took advantage of a new South, creating a small-scale reversal of the Great Migration. A story such as hers, which reveals much of the experience of the Great Migration, would be lost in traditional migration history, but recent historical studies have addressed this omission.

Historians now employ previously underutilized sources, especially personal accounts with the movement’s participants found in diaries, letters, and interviews—oral history is central to the new migration studies. Rather than focusing on
what was done to the migrants, these historians focus on what these people did. To fully deliver this story a broader view of their lives is necessary, leading to accounts that examine not only the journey northward, but also the conditions of life in the South, the diversity of backgrounds, and the experiences of these people upon arriving in the "Promised Land" of New York, Chicago, Detroit, and other northern cities—thus the recognition of the need to integrate migration history with urban studies. Upon reaching the urban centers, migrants tried to merge their former culture with their new environment; life in the North was a mixture of northern and southern influences, and is a central part of the migration story. Historians have also moved away from focusing solely on race as the defining element in the migration story, combining race with class and gender as factors that contributed to personal identity and how these individuals perceived their place in their new environments.

Even the most basic story line of the Great Migration was more complex than previously understood. For example, the dating of the migration misses important earlier movements. Although the number of people leaving the South dramatically increased during World War I, it is important to note that beginning in the 1890s dissatisfied southern blacks began to relocate to northern cities. The traditional model of this movement also fails to encompass many other important movements, because not all African Americans who left the South headed to the North. Prior to the Great Migration there was a major relocation of African Americans to Kansas. Taking place in the late 1870s and early 1880s, the Exoduster movement was an assertion of freedom for emancipated slaves who saw declining opportunities with the end of Reconstruction. In addition, many who picked up their lives anew never left the South. Some blacks that did not want to abandon their agricultural lifestyle moved within the rural South in the search for opportunity and in resistance to racial oppression, while others moved to southern urban or industrial centers that often acted as an intermediary point for those who would eventually go north. Recent accounts stress the similarities between the migration within the South and that to northern cities: the diversity of the individual experiences; the central role of family and kin networks in facilitating the moves; and the need to recognize the individual decisions that interacted with, but were not subsumed by, economic necessities. Although there might be expanded economic opportunities in the southern cities versus the plantation or small farm, blacks still lived within the system of legally supported segregation. In his study of African American coal miners in the South, Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915–1932 (1990), Joe William Trotter Jr. further complicates the history by noting that there was a migration that was less a move from rural to urban than a move from rural to the "rural-industrial" coalfields of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. Because of the particular circumstances of the southern black coal miners, they were able to exert significant control over their entrance into industry, creating a distinctive lifestyle that retained ties to their roots in the rural South while adapting to the necessities of industrial capitalism. These new studies demonstrate the importance of migration to those who never left the South, as well as the role of "pre-migrations" for those who eventually went north.

James R. Grossman, in his study Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration (1989), further shows the complexity of the movement. Grossman writes that the journey to the North "was shaped by a complex interaction between structural forces in the South, the migration experience, structural forces in the North, racial attitudes, and the migrants' perceptions of each of these. Migrants made important decisions based on those per-
ceptions, and only an analysis of the total context of immigration—North and South—affords an understanding of either those decisions or the policy implications of responses to the movement." Basing his narrative on the perspective of the migrants, Grossman first describes and analyzes black southern life. For example, he questions the role of labor agents, who were employed by northern industrialists to lure workers to their factories, as a primary cause of the exodus. White southerners, who were concerned over the depletion of their labor force and unwilling to accept the ability of African Americans to think for themselves, often blamed the migration on these labor agents. Past historical accounts tended to accept these contentions at face value, thus exaggerating the role of the labor agent. Grossman argues that they played a secondary, although not unimportant, role. More important was the lack of economic opportunity in the rural South and the assistance of family and friends, many of whom had already made the journey to the North—a potential migrant would be more likely to rely upon the advice of family and friends than that of the labor agents.

Grossman shows that when they arrived in the North, migrants found a world far removed from their homeland, yet one made easier by support networks of family, friends, and other blacks. Through African American institutions—the church and aid groups such as the Chicago Urban League, most notably—adaptation to life in the urban North was made easier, and a culture appeared that blended aspects from their southern pasts and their industrial, urban present. Grossman points out that "the migrants did not leave their cultural baggage at the train station." Yet, despite these support systems, for most the "Promised Land" was far from a reality. Even in the absence of legal segregation, racism was still prevalent, as evidenced in the race riots in St. Louis in 1917 and in Chicago and other northern cities in 1919. Economic opportunity was also precarious, with blacks often the first to be fired during economic downturns or when white veterans returned from war. Grossman makes clear that the experience of the migration was far from over when the migrants reached the North.

The greatest challenge for these new studies of the Great Migration is to balance the deterministic features of the external forces of agricultural recession in the South and industrial expansion and labor shortages in the North with the undeniable centrality of human agency and migration experiences on the part of the participants, who were, after all, the actors in the historical drama. Their stories must come first; but, of course, ignoring the external factors limits one's understanding of the historical context of the migration. Effective analyses draw attention to the agency of the migrants without losing the broader context. Within the conditions that result from historical forces, the individual has a significant latitude of options in how they deal with them. These options and decisions have rightly taken center stage in recent studies of the Great Migration. They have taken deterministic, impersonal accounts and given them the richness and complexity of lived experience—the essence of good history.

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