

Chapter Title: "Negro Women in Our Economic Life," 1930

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“Negro Women in Our Economic Life,” 1930

Not even a cursory study of Negro women in our economic life can be assumed without first considering the changing position of all women in our economic life. One hears frequently the woman of today referred to as “the new woman,” much as we write and speak of “the new Negro.” In my opinion there is no more a new woman among us than there is a new Negro. What has changed and what is changing is not the woman. The change is in her status in a rapidly developing social order. The advent of the mechanical age, historically referred to as the Industrial Revolution, roughly marks the passing of one social and economic order and the dawn of another that is still in the process of unfolding its undetermined course. Under the old social and economic order, the family was the economic unit of production. Under these conditions the activities of women were recognized along with those of men as productive, and the contribution of the wife was as valuable in the eyes of society as that of the husband. There was no difference in the economic function between men and women, in that they were jointly producers and consumers. But when, one after another, the traditional family activities were taken out of the home, the function of women in the home steadily lost its importance in production until it fell to a minimum and emerged associated primarily with consumption. Production in the new economic order, where standards of value are money standards, became

fundamentally a matter of creating a commodity or service which demands a money price. Modern industrial processes, having robbed the home of every vestige of its former economic function, left in the home to be performed by the woman only those services which are as "valueless" and "priceless" as air and water but not recognized as *valuable* in a price economy, where standards of value are money standards. If, then, women were to answer the challenge of the new economy and place themselves again among the producers of the world, they must change their status from that of homemakers to that of industrial workers and change their activities from valueless home duties to those that resulted in the production of goods that have a price-value. The answer of women to the challenge is shown by the increase in the number of women gainfully employed from 1,321,364 in 1870, when we first had census figures in which gainfully employed persons were separated by sex, to 7,306,844 in 1920.

We are principally interested in determining the extent to which Negro women have taken their places in this price economy and the effect, if any, their presence has had on our economic life. Work for wages has always been more widespread among Negro than among white women. In 1910, 54.7 percent of the 3,680,536 Negro women in the United States, ten years of age and over, were gainfully occupied while only 19.6 percent of the 30,769,641 white women of the same age group were gainfully employed. In 1920, 38.9 percent of the 4,043,763 Negro women, ten years of age and over, were gainfully employed as compared with 16.1 percent of the 36,279,013 white women of the same age group. The Negro women in 1910 were, however, principally confined to agricultural pursuits, domestic, and personal service. Only 67,937 Negro women, or 3.4 percent of the Negro women ten years of age and over gainfully employed, were among the 1,821,570 women employed in manufacture and mechanical industries; white women workers, on the other hand, during the same decade, came into the business and industrial world at a greater proportionate rate than even men. It was not until the Great War withdrew the men from industry that Negro women were found in any considerable numbers in manufacturing and mechanical industries. The 1920 Census shows that 104,983 Negro women, or 6.7 percent of the Negro women ten years of age and over gainfully

employed, were among the 1,930,241 women employed in manufacturing and mechanical industries. This is an increase of almost 100 percent for Negro women in comparison to an increase of less than 1 percent of all women so employed.

There is no question but that this unprecedented increase in the number of Negro women in industry was due to demand for labor because of the stress of war production and the reduction of available industrial labor supply resulting from the cessation of immigration and the withdrawal of three million men from normal economic functions to war activities. That these women have been retained to a large degree is established by surveys made since 1920, principally in 1921, 1922, [and] 1925, by the Women's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor. Their survey of Negro women employed in fifteen states, published in 1929, based on the study made in 1928, reports 17,134 Negro women employed in 682 establishments; an increase of nearly 1,000 over the 16,835 Negro women reported employed in the same industries in a similar survey published in 1922.

The wages of all women in industry have been found to be below that of men. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the wages of Negro women, who are the marginal workers, should be not only lower than that of men employed in like pursuits, but also lower than that of white women. Any group that constitutes the marginal supply of labor will be paid less for their labor than those whose services are in constant and steady demand. Then, too, the labor turnover among women is greater than that among men, due largely to family duties [and] physical handicaps, but principally to the fact that women do not consider their jobs as permanent. They have not developed a philosophy of work under which they regard the production of price-demanding commodities as their life work. They are constantly expecting when the children get out of the way, or their husbands obtain better jobs, that they will then stop work. The thought of working the rest of their lives is a foreign concept and never enters their minds. Hence, women are slow to organize in unions and men are slower to accept them. The Negro woman in addition has little if any factory training and therefore no factory sense. She must accept such opening wedges [wages] at such return as may be offered her.

Not only are the wages of Negro women lower than those of white women, but Negro women as a whole are confined to the simpler types of work, and are not engaged in highly skilled labor, although many of the occupations in which Negro women are found require care and a number require some skill. This, too, might be expected; for the industrial history of any highly organized community will show, that as members of a new and inexperienced nationality, sex, or race arrive at the doors of its industries, the occupations that open to them ordinarily are those vacated by an earlier stratum of workers who have moved on to more alluring places. All industrial workers, regardless of their racial identification, have started at the bottom of the round. The important thing is *the start*.

Although Negro women are not engaged as skilled, high-priced workers, their presence in large numbers in industry during the past decade has had a marked effect on their status and on the economic life of the country.

To begin with, in the natural process of events in industry, the Negro women must eventually push on to more skilled, better paying jobs. Any other procedure would mean a waste of training, factory sense, and accumulated knowledge which the economies of big business must recognize.

Furthermore, the opportunity for participation in industrial pursuits by Negro women means a raising of the standard of living not only of Negro families but of all American families. The addition of this labor supply aids cheaper production, which in turn means more goods can be enjoyed by a large number of people. In a more direct sense, it affects the Negro family since another wage-earner is added to the family. The derogatory effects of the mother being out of the home are overbalanced by the increased family income, which makes possible the securing of at least the necessities of life and perhaps a few luxuries. If her services in the home are to be rated by the man as valueless consumption, the satisfaction which comes to the woman in realizing that she is a producer makes for peace and happiness, the chief requisites in any home.

The increased leisure that is enjoyed by women who have entered the industrial and manufacturing enterprises is giving rise to an improved educational and social standard among Negro women. Not

many weeks ago, I was consulted by a colored woman sixty-two years of age, who had fallen in an unguarded, open manhole. Upon inquiry I learned that she and her witness were operators of machines in a dress factory and that they worked from 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon; that on the evening of the accident they were returning from night school where they had gone for a seven o'clock class to learn to be dress cutters, which would place them considerably higher up the wage scale. This is a typical example of the opportunity for economic and social advancement which the shorter hours enjoyed by industrial workers are making possible for Negro women who have industrial positions. Furthermore, the dignity of being a factory worker has resulted in Negro women thus engaged feeling a greater degree of self-respect and receiving opportunities for social intercourse and expression that as domestic servants were denied them.

The association between the various racial groups employed in a factory will prove an important factor in solving the laborer's problems. The real seat of racial friction is between the working groups, whose resistance to change in the economic status of a competing group invariably expresses itself in what we commonly define as race, or class prejudice. Could the great mass of white workers learn from industrial experience with Negro workers that they have a common purpose in life, the protection of their bargaining power, and that the sooner the untouched wealth of Negro labor is harnessed into this common purpose, the better can they bargain with capital; then and only then would industrial racial friction subside. Certainly the continued presence of Negro women in industry demonstrates that we have made progress toward reducing the resistance of white labor to Negro invasion of industry.

Surveying the field as a whole, we find over a hundred thousand Negro women employed in the manufacturing and mechanical industries of the United States in 1920, an increase of nearly 100 percent in the number so employed in 1910. This is a striking contrast to an increase of only one-tenth of 1 percent in all women so engaged during the decade. Without this additional labor supply, it is doubtful that even scientific management could have carried mass production to such a degree that we should have had a period so marked in the magnitude of its pro-

ductivity as to be called the "New Industrial Revolution." Within the two decades during which Negro women have entered industry in large numbers, production has increased at such a rapid rate that economists have been forced to change their theory of a deficit economy, based on the assumption that population would always press upon food supply, to a theory of surplus economy. While the labor of Negro women cannot be held as the efficient cause of the mass production, it is submitted that without this available labor supply at a low price, mass production in many industries would not have been undertaken.

Negro families as well as all families have profited and suffered from the effects of a surplus economy. Mass productivity has multiplied the number and variety of stimuli which play upon the individual, resulting in not only high-speed consumption but diversified consumption. The result is that individual interests and standards of conduct are conceived in terms of self-satisfaction without a stabilizing sense of group responsibility. The Negro, the furthest down in the economic scale, can least of all afford to succumb to these varied economic stimuli. If he is going to profit from the increased purchasing power, which the presence of Negro women in the productive enterprises has made possible, he must lead the way in harnessing the variety of his demands to the purchase of commodities representing the fundamental and durable satisfaction of life. Only in this way can we hope to promote the establishment of factors of stability in economic demand which will materially provide the basis of an economic balance in industry; which in turn will assure not only the continued presence of Negro women in industry, but stability of employment and constantly improving economic position for *all* workers.

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“The Emancipated Woman,” ca. 1930s

The story of the emancipation of women is or ought to be familiar to all of us present this afternoon. That great change in methods of manufacture and production, called the Industrial Revolution, was the fundamental cause of a new era, not only in industry, but also in domestic life. When Hargreaves (1764) invented [the] spinning jenny, operated by water power, by which six to twelve threads could be spun at one time, and James Watts discovered that steam would also operate a spinning jenny, the confinement of women to their homes, where every article of clothing had previously been produced, became a thing of the past. Then came the discovery in 1765 that coal could be used to smelt iron and liquid iron could be molded into machines that would produce many more times the amount of goods than human hands. Huge iron machines were not suitable for home use; furthermore, they required many persons to operate them. So they were congregated in what became to be called factories because it was the place that factors (commercial agents) congregated. The women and children were taken from their homes to operate the factory machines.

At the end of the week's work, instead of turning over the products to the head of the family, to trade in for staples—the women workers received a wage, which they could spend themselves—without turning it over to any man. It didn't take women long to forget that habit of

turning over. Thus, we developed a large group of economically independent women.

The presence of women in [the] industrial world created a number of social problems. First, the conditions, wages, and hours of labor, which are still perplexing as illustrated by efforts [of] Congress [to] fix minimum wage for women, defeated by decision—[of the] USSC [U.S. Supreme Court]—held it was interference with the liberty to contract guaranteed by the 14th Amendment. [The] Oregon statute forbade employment of women in factories for more than ten hours in one day—[as a] valid exercise of political power for health [of] women and race. Second, social freedom: [they] feared morals of [the] nation [would] be lost when women were turned into [the] industrial world [of work]. The same argument was used against Woman Suffrage. A woman has as a bribe her self. It never seemed to occur to the men who advanced these objections that it was within their power to remove the problem. But thank God, the women have been able to handle the situation, whenever it arose, so perfectly that *Scarlet Letters* are truly figures of history and not of our modern-day acquaintance. [The] third problem was concerned with family life. Women engaged in labor, postponed marriage, or controlled births. Those who have families permitted them to rear themselves. Divorces increased—not because the contact with [the] world made women less faithful, but because she no longer had to put up with embarrassments, neglects, and cruelties in order to secure bread and butter—she could make that for herself.

Having gained a taste of freedom in the economic world, naturally women began to demand equality in the political world in order, if for no other reason that they might help legislate for their own protection. Like all other social reform movements, the grant of suffrage in the English-speaking countries had an impetus in this case, the democracy cry of the Great War. So in England in 1918 and the U.S. in 1920 the vote was granted women.

What type of woman has the economic and political freedom produced? Various types. Of course we have the Reactionists, who are always with us in every field of activity. Continually wishing, hoping, praying for the return of the good “old times” but bending every effort to live on in these times. If they are genuinely sincere in their desire,

I often wonder why these persons do not put on long skirts and bonnets and stay at home and operate a hand cotton jenny. The answer is obvious: they could not continue to exist under such conditions in this world of competition. The world is attractive enough for them to want to continue to live in it—so they take a half-handed part—in order to exist. When if they put their all in the game they might live and help others to live better. These persons to my mind are a drag on society. Their criticisms are destructive; not constructive lives are a nullity.

We have a second group, who also fail to contribute. They do not think enough about what is going on to lend even a destructive criticism—As Omar the old Tentmaker puts it:

Into this Universe, and why not knowing
Nor whence, like Water willy-nilly flowing,
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste
I know not whether, willy-nilly blowing

They drift from dinner to the movies, thence to bed, thence to breakfast and to work and so on. Or if in hard luck, they struggle and wail, cursing “our day” or society. We know the pigs’ object in life. It has been beautifully and permanently outlined in Carlyle’s “pig catechism.” The pigs’ object is to get fat and keep fat—to get his full share of swill and as much more as he can manage to secure. And his life object is worthy. By sticking at it he develops fat hams inside his bristles, and we know, although he does not, that the production of fat hams is his destiny.

But our human destiny is not to produce fat hams. Why do so many of us live earnestly on the pig basis? Why do we struggle savagely for money to buy our kind of swill—luxury, food, autos, and cease all struggle when that money is obtained?

Is fear of poverty and dependence the only emotion that should move us?

Are we merely to stay here, eat here?

A great German scientist, very learned and about as imaginative as a warthog, declares that the human face is merely an extension and elaboration of the alimentary canal—that the beauty of expression, the marvelous qualities of a noble human face, are merely indirect results of the alimentary canal trying to satisfy its wants.

That is a hideous conception, is it not? But it is justified when we consider the average human life, women whom the industrial renaissance, which we previously outlined, placed in positions of economic ease. Their existence has much to justify German's speculations.

But we have a third type of woman, who has developed out of these social forces which we have just outlined. I call her the *Emancipated Woman*. You know, when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed and the Negro slaves received [the] right to emancipation they did not automatically become emancipated. Sixty years of emancipation—hasn't emancipated some Negroes. Mr. Charlie is still God and his word is law. So the fact that social conditions decreed the emancipation of women didn't emancipate all of them. Salvation is free—but each person has to make the step to be saved for himself. So emancipation of women is possible—but like everything else in the world, it requires some effort on the part of each woman to become emancipated.

If that is all woman does, she isn't much better off than the youngsters at dinner with the Parson and his Elders, who devoured the chicken, while the kids [sop] up the gravy. When Johnny the infant could no longer restrain his comments on the unfairness of this arrangement, he was admonished by the Parson in blind faith.

Making a living—[and] casting a vote[—]are merely the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. You haven't tasted political freedom if all you do is cast a vote and stop there—you haven't begun to enjoy economic independence if the extent of your economic activity is a struggle to get enough money to eat, sleep and drink and go to an occasional movie. *The emancipated woman* demands

- 1) that her vote and those she controls show tangible evidence of making this a better world to live in. Mine is a very practical kind of religion. I believe the parable of the talents is applicable to every one of us who has a vote—if we have one vote—then we must account for its use, as much as if it were one talent and if there are ten votes in our houses—I liken them to ten talents. Women, you are not emancipated if you are not using your votes—to put women and *men* (not men and women) but women first,

men second, in public offices that control our destinies. If the Italians can put a judge on the Common Pleas bench why can't the Negroes? Because neither the women nor the men are emancipated. We Negroes are truly wicked and slothful servants—to be such a religious people—we have more churches and spend more time in them yet we do not seem to have caught full import of that simple parable: Joy unto everyone that hath shall be given and he shall have abundance, but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

- 2) The emancipated woman demands (second) that her purpose in this economic struggle, of which she has become an integral part, shall be more than the securing of the necessities of life. Why do the Jews get everything they demand in this city—Municipal and C.P. [Common Pleas] judgeships, plural if you please—District Attorney, members of Council, Legislature, Congress? Because they control the money bags—and money talks. We are the poorest group of people in this city, state, or nation. If we have a candidate for a high office, we can't raise enough money to wage an effective campaign. When other races, with adverse interests, must pay our debts—we must submit to their policies. We need money, and the women who have been recently granted political emancipation, if they would be emancipated, must learn the lesson from the better experience of our men. Yes, I say strive for money—economic independence is a concomitant of political and social freedom. You cannot have one without the other. The custom of other races will teach you the same thing. The Armenians, better known [as] Queen Mary's people—are a poverty-stricken people. Persecution, plunder, war—has been their history. We do not have to go to Armenia for examples. Common, everyday examples will suffice. Who are the women in your neighborhood, who are prominent in any line of work?

I never saw a pauper [who is] president of a club—or leader of anything. Think it over for yourself and you will decide that the economically independent women and men are those who are leading in all walks of life. When all you have is a mere existence, you cannot hope to share the fruits of social or political independence. The emancipated woman is economically independent.

- 3) The emancipated woman uses her luxury—which affords her time and leisure—in making contacts with women of her own and other races. Wide contacts are earmarks of emancipated women. When freedom is restrained we know only those in the circles [with] which we are permitted to associate, but when we are at liberty our associations naturally increase. It is only natural that one who seeks the advantages of emancipation should form wider contacts. But if one purposefully seeks to become emancipated this is a prime necessity to accomplish her purpose. The emancipated woman is a person of wide vision, tolerant disposition and cosmopolitan nature. These qualities can only be developed by contact. Nations that are democratic in thought are those that have the greatest contact with the world. England, for example, is the pivot point for all commerce between the New and Old World. If it [is] to be wondered, with these contacts—a great democratic nation should be developed. Germany wanted to build the Baghdad Railway, so as to increase her contacts. Women who would also be democratic will build contacts—through clubs, federations—and clubhouses. There is no wonder we in Philadelphia are known to be provincial, when we haven’t a single clubhouse where women of all faiths, ideals, and interests can discuss on a common informal basis their thoughts. Thoughts are things, and when a sufficient number of people think alike on a single fundamental issue—their thoughts create new mores as the sociologist term, thoughts and ideas

which are sufficiently accepted to become customs. The colored women have ideas regarding our racial advancement [that are] worthy [of] acceptance; sometimes many of us have [the] same ideas but we have no contacts by which we can bring together our ideas—thrash them out and unite in thought. We accept as a consequence the ideas, thoughts, plans made for us by the white women in their more than one hundred clubhouses in the city of Philadelphia alone. While we are meeting at this house, that church, thinking to ourselves, because when we meet it is for the formal transaction of business, they are discussing informally their ideas on our problems and formulating plans for us. The exchange of ideas brought about by wide contacts is as essential to the production of an emancipated womanhood. By these contacts a) we can unite and concentrate on our own ideas regarding racial problems. b) we can break down barriers that exist between us—the woman you do not like is the woman you do not know. You like the people you know. c) we can make impressive interracial contacts. We'll have a place to invite women of other races to confer with us. Being in our own home, we shall be more at ease and [in a] better position to put over the plan before us. d) If for no other reason because men have had clubs and we can match them.

To summarize, the Emancipated Woman will first get money—so that she can be independent in her thought and action. But if she wants to be more than a million other women, who had money but whose dead bodies are now mingled in the dust beneath, she will use the leisure, the power, that money gives her first to secure political emancipation that she will secure political recognition in a larger sense for herself and her race, [and] second, to build clubhouses that will afford such contacts that the broadening influences of club life will produce racial programs, made not by white women but by black women, for black people, who are democratic and united in thought, who are emancipated.