

Black Flight: Lethal Violence and the Great Migration, 1900–1930

STEWART E. TOLNAY & E. M. BECK

AFTER DECADES of relative residential stability, southern blacks began migrating in striking numbers following the turn of the twentieth century. Reconstruction and Redemption saw a fair amount of short-distance movement as black tenant farmers exchanged one landlord for another in search of favorable financial arrangements. Some blacks moved across state lines, generally toward the Southwest, in pursuit of King Cotton and the livelihood it promised. However, these population movements pale in

Stewart E. Tolnay is associate professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Albany. His previous research has been concentrated in the area of historical demography, especially the history of American fertility patterns and change. Most recently, his work has addressed racial violence in the American South during the latter part of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries.

E. M. Beck is associate professor of sociology at the University of Georgia. His current research focuses on racial violence, discrimination, and economic changes in the white lower class in the South. Recent articles on these topics have appeared in *Social Forces* and *Law and Society Review*.

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comparison with the massive migration of southern blacks during the first half of this century.

During the first 10 years of the twentieth century, the South lost 170,000 blacks through net migration. The level of net out-migration increased substantially during the second decade to 450,000, and even further during the 1920s to 750,000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975: 95). As a result of this movement, the black population of the United States exhibited a substantially different geographic profile in 1930 than it had at the turn of the century. Whereas 90% of all blacks resided in southern states in 1900, that percentage had dropped to 79 by 1930 (*ibid.*: 22–23). In addition to the South-North relocation, blacks *within* the South also were residentially mobile. For instance, the percentage of southern blacks living in urban places grew from 17 in 1900 to 33 by 1930, and much of this black urbanization was due to migration.

Three general types of explanations have been offered for the increased mobility of southern blacks in the early part of this century: (1) those that stress underlying economic forces, including regional wage differentials and expansion of employment opportunities in the North; (2) those that stress underlying social forces, for example, educational opportunities, racial violence, and voter disenfranchisement; and (3) those that focus on more “precipitating” causes, such as floods or the boll weevil infestation. The consensus of contemporary observers and modern investigators seems to be that the precipitating causes combined with festering economic dissatisfaction to trigger the black exodus, especially as employment opportunities for blacks expanded in the North. Although frequently mentioned, social factors, including racial violence, generally have been accorded secondary status as a motive for black migration.

The objective of this essay is to lay the groundwork for a more exhaustive examination of the role played by racial violence in the migration of southern blacks after 1900. While this issue has been considered previously (e.g., Fligstein 1981; Johnson 1923), certain weaknesses in data and conceptualization prevent those analyses from being definitive. Yet discussions of the Great Migration have traditionally downplayed the role of racial violence, assigning it either a secondary role or none at all. We maintain that this assumption is premature and warrants much closer scrutiny. At

the core of our objective are two primary aims: (1) to propose a conceptual framework that describes how racial violence and black migration were linked, and (2) to raise the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between migration and racial violence, that is, the possibility that violence induced migration, which in turn moderated the level of violence.

THE BLACK MIGRATION

Blacks were not complete strangers to residential mobility before the turn of the century. Indeed, one of the most noticeable benefits of emancipation was the freedman's ability to relocate. Between 1870 and 1900, many took advantage of this freedom to move to growing urban areas in the South, or even to leave the South (Donald 1921; Gottlieb 1987). More common, however, were short-distance moves within the rural South as landless farmers sought better remunerative arrangements with new landlords (Daniel 1985; Jaynes 1986; Mandle 1978; Novak 1978; Ransom and Sutch 1977). While most of these locally migratory farmers never ventured far from home, others relocated to southwestern states, where cotton cultivation was expanding and opportunities were greater. Arkansas, Texas, and the Oklahoma Territory all experienced considerable in-migration of blacks between 1870 and 1900 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975: 95).

After 1900 the pace of migration accelerated, and its character was transformed. Even as many blacks continued to circulate within the rural South and to gravitate toward urban areas within the South, more and more migrants began to make the longer trek northward. To illustrate the extent and variation of the post-1900 migration of blacks, the figures in Table 1 report intercensal, net migration for the first three decades of the century (*ibid.*). Two groups of states are represented: four states of the Cotton South and four northern industrial states that were popular destinations for black migrants. All four southern states experienced net out-migration of blacks between 1900 and 1930. Furthermore, the general trend was toward heavier out-migration as the period progressed, especially for Georgia and South Carolina, two bulwarks of the Cotton South. Conversely, the northern states experienced net in-migration during these decades, and the pace of migration quickened over time. Although these crude figures are only sug-

Table 1 Black population changes in selected southern and northern states, 1900–1930

Region	Decade		
	1900–1910	1910–1920	1920–1930
Cotton South			
South Carolina	–72,000	–74,500	–204,300
Georgia	–16,200	–74,700	–260,000
Alabama	–22,100	–70,800	–80,700
Mississippi	–30,900	–129,600	–68,800
Industrial North			
New York	35,800	63,100	172,800
Pennsylvania	32,900	82,500	101,700
Michigan	1,900	38,700	86,100
Illinois	23,500	69,800	119,300

gestive, it is quite apparent that this period was characterized by a massive regional relocation of the black population.

If one looks closer at those states from which most of the black migrants came, it becomes clear that rates of black out-migration *within* the South were not uniform. Some counties were characterized by extremely high out-migration; others maintained relatively stable black populations. To illustrate this regional variability, we have estimated county-level black net migration rates (per 100 population) for two Cotton South states that experienced very heavy losses of blacks through migration, Georgia and South Carolina. Figure 1 has been shaded according to the rate of black out-migration experienced, between 1920 and 1930.¹

Clearly, the heaviest black out-migration occurred in a swath running roughly through the middle of Georgia and South Carolina. Interestingly, this area defines the black belt as well as the area that had been dominated by a plantation cotton economy (Mandle 1978). Such intrastate variation raises interesting questions about the causes of the differential migration. Why were blacks more likely to leave these regions of South Carolina and Georgia? Was the cotton economy there particularly depressed? Were blacks subjected to more brutal treatment by

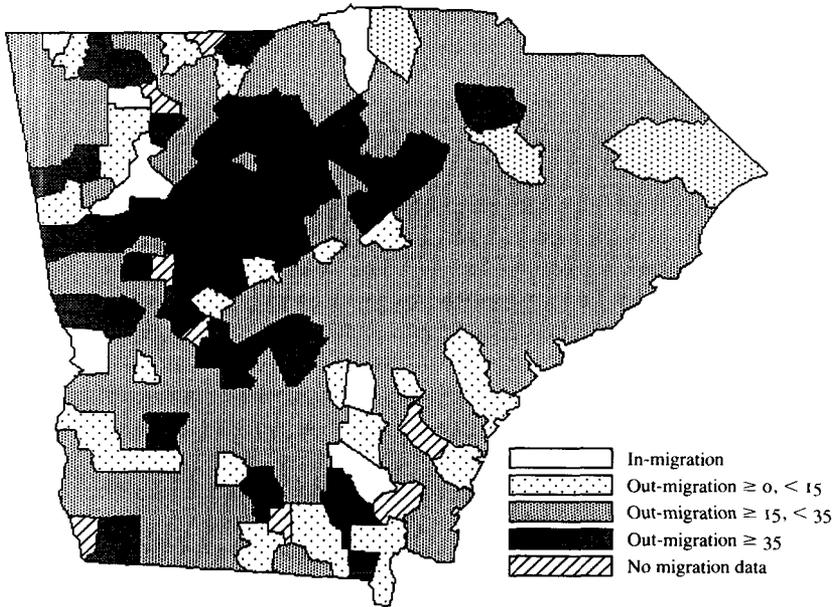


Figure 1 Net black out-migration rates (per 100 population) from counties in Georgia and South Carolina, 1920–30. Source: See Fligstein 1981.

whites in those areas? Did economic competition between whites and blacks restrict economic opportunity and thereby encourage out-migration?²

EXPLANATIONS FOR BLACK MIGRATION

Theoretical approaches to migration, in one fashion or another, generally use “push” and “pull” factors to account for movement (or stability). Simply put, if the net attractiveness of a potential destination outweighs the net attractiveness of the place of origin, migration is expected to occur (e.g., Lee 1966; Ravenstein 1885, 1889). While the basics of this rational human-choice model seem sound, identification and measurement of the relevant push and pull factors often pose significant challenges. Many contemporary accounts, written during the early part of the century, attempted to identify the primary explanations (push and pull factors) for

the dramatic migration of blacks. The explanations proposed for the Great Migration can be divided, crudely, into economic and social forces.³

Economic Forces

Economic forces figured prominently in early discussions of black migration. In fact, most contemporary observers ascribed primary importance to economic factors. For example, Scroggs (1917: 1040) wrote, "The cause of the migration, like that of practically all great movements of peoples, is fundamentally economic." Scott (1920: 13) observed that "the economic motive stands among the foremost reasons for the decision of the group [blacks] to leave the South." These sentiments were also expressed by many others (e.g., Donald 1921; Kennedy 1930; Lewis 1931; U.S. Department of Labor 1919; Woodson 1969 [1918]; Woofter 1920).

The economic push factors operating on southern blacks were formidable. Since Emancipation, southern rural blacks had languished in a plantation economy, with little hope of moving up the "agricultural ladder" or of finding employment outside farming (Mandle 1978). At the bottom of a pecking order defined by class and caste, they were also caught in the clash of competing class interests that split the white community. On the one hand, southern planters and employers benefited from the availability of cheap, black labor as long as it remained docile and servile. On the other hand, poor whites competed with black labor. This "split labor market" generated conflict between poorer whites and blacks which often erupted in violence (Bonacich 1972, 1975; Wilson 1978). Further, it was in the interest of southern planters and employers to restrict alternative opportunities available to the black laboring class, as well as to prevent a coalition of black and white labor. In short, the economic advancement of rural blacks was not in the interest of either class of whites, but their economic subordination served the interests of both.

Although a fortunate few were able to purchase land, most remained sharecroppers, tenant farmers, or farm laborers (Daniel 1985; Flynn 1983; Higgs 1977; Mandle 1978; Novak 1978; Ransom and Sutch 1977). Subject to the whims of landlords and the vagaries of cotton prices, most black farmers scratched out

a subsistence living from year to year and could offer no different future to their children. As this dismal economic situation for rural blacks persisted decade after decade, an environment conducive to out-migration was created. The situation in urban areas was little better, with most blacks laboring at poverty wages in unskilled occupations.

The chronic economic problems faced by southern blacks typically were translated into migration only when there was a promise of better conditions elsewhere. Often this promise was as close as a nearby plantation. For others, the promise lay far to the southwest. However, the greatest potential developed in the industrial North as the World War I economy and the restriction of European immigration created opportunities and wages that simply were unavailable to blacks in the South (Donald 1921; Gottlieb 1987; Kennedy 1930; Kiser 1967 [1932]; Scroggs 1917; U.S. Department of Labor 1919; Woodson 1969 [1918]; Woofter 1920). For the first time since Emancipation, black labor was in great demand outside the agricultural South, and those opportunities were attractive enough to overwhelm the substantial obstacles to migration (Mandle 1978).

There were also less chronic circumstances, with economic implications, that contributed to black migration. We refer to these as "precipitating" causes. One important precipitating cause of black migration was the relentless march of the boll weevil on a northeasterly course through the South. After entering Texas in the 1890s, the weevil spread throughout the South, reaching Alabama in 1910 and South Carolina in 1918. In its wake it left a devastated cotton economy, with displaced croppers and tenants. Many were forced to migrate in pursuit of a livelihood. A second precipitating cause of black migration was the devastating floods in Alabama and Mississippi, which destroyed many crops and displaced many black farmers (Woodson 1969 [1918]: 170). Like the persistent and chronic economic hardships faced by southern blacks, these disasters undoubtedly increased the economic incentives to migrate.

The most thorough empirical examination of economic explanations for the black migration between 1900 and 1930 has been conducted by Fligstein (1981). He identifies three distinct dimensions to the economic explanation of southern migration: the social relations of production and exchange, the technical relations

of production, and capitalist development in the South. Fligstein infers that the social relations of production and capitalist development had a significant influence on county-level net migration rates between 1900 and 1930. Especially important were tenure arrangements in agriculture, the intensity of cotton production, and the influence of urban areas (*ibid.*: 124). According to Fligstein, these were the primary economic forces that determined the movement of blacks into and out of southern counties. Fligstein's findings also indicate that black out-migration was linked to the spread of the boll weevil through the South.

Social Forces

Social causes of black migration were as widely acknowledged by contemporary observers as the economic forces, but they were nearly always considered to have been of secondary importance. Woofler (1920: 121) enumerated many of the primary social factors: "injustice in the courts, lynching, denial of suffrage, discrimination in public conveyances, and inequalities in educational advantage."

Early in the century, southern society was doubly stratified by class and race. Elaborate arrangements were made to guarantee that blacks occupied and recognized their inferior caste position. The passage of various Jim Crow laws provided for separate and unequal facilities for blacks and whites (Flynn 1983; Newby 1965; Novak 1978; Woodward 1966). Restrictive voting statutes, which became more and more common after the turn of the century, effectively curtailed the black vote (Kousser 1974). State legislatures allocated vastly unequal financial support for black and white schools (Kousser 1980); moreover, county officials sometimes siphoned off the meager resources earmarked for blacks to support white schools (Kennedy 1930; Myrdal 1972; Woodson 1930). Like chronic economic hopelessness, social abuses created an atmosphere conducive to out-migration.

One of the most telling indicators of the inferior social position of blacks in southern society was the level of lethal violence to which they were exposed. Lynching was an all-too-common method of punishment for blacks who committed criminal acts or who simply violated the rules of acceptable behavior for their caste. Lynchings may well have contributed to the willingness of

southern blacks to leave their homes, either for the North or for more peaceful locations in the South. As Scott (1920: 22) wrote in his study of black migration during World War I, "Both whites and negroes in mentioning the reasons for the movement generally give lynchings as one of the most important causes and state that the fear of the mob has greatly accelerated the exodus." Letters of black migrants published by the *Journal of Negro History* in 1919 also contain references to lynchings as a reason for migration (Scott 1919). In the following section, we discuss more thoroughly the role of violent persecution in the migration of blacks, the central concern of this essay.

MODELING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACIAL VIOLENCE AND MIGRATION

To model adequately the linkage between racial violence and black migration, we believe that each must be treated as both dependent and independent variable. That is, while racial violence is viewed as a potential incentive (push factor) for black migration, black migration is seen as a force operating to reduce the level of violence against blacks. This basic conceptualization is illustrated in Figure 2. The positive arrow from violence to migration reflects the relationship hypothesized above and considered by Johnson (1923) and Fligstein (1981). The negative arrow running in the opposite direction has been hinted at in the literature but never systematically articulated or empirically

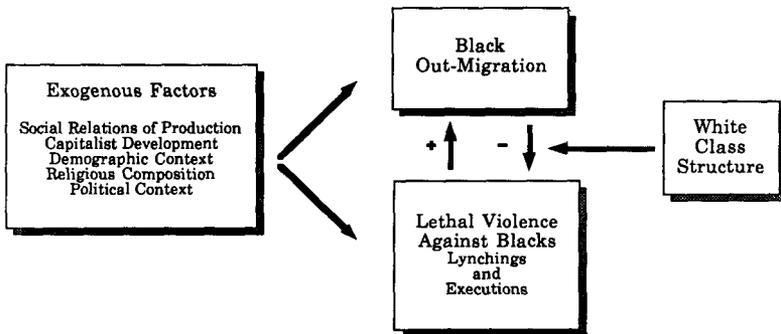


Figure 2 Conceptual model

estimated. This dimension is critical to the relationship between violent persecution and black migration, for a failure to consider it leads to underestimation of the relationship's other component (the positive arrow).

Violent Persecution as a Cause of Black Migration

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries southern blacks were exposed to truly incredible levels of lethal violence, both at the hands of white mobs and within the white criminal justice system (Ayers 1984; Shapiro 1988; Williamson 1984). For example, between 1882 and 1930, 1,655 blacks were victims of lynch mobs within the Cotton South alone.⁴ But lynching was not the only form of lethal social control whites exercised over blacks. During the same period, 1,299 blacks were legally executed in the Cotton South. Of all those exposed to lethal social control in these states, roughly 90% were black. Since the proportion of blacks in these states' populations never approached 90%, blacks clearly were exposed to disproportionately high levels of lethal control.

By many accounts, violence terrorized southern blacks, especially where lynchings were common. A report by the U.S. Department of Labor (1919: 107) concluded that "another of the more effective causes of the exodus, a cause that appeals to every Negro whether high or low, industrious or idle, respected or condemned, is the Negroes' insecurity from mob violence and lynchings." Several specific cases of heavy black out-migration have been linked to specific lynching incidents. For example, one section of Georgia experienced heavy out-migration following a series of horrible lynchings in 1915 and 1916. According to Woofter (cited in U.S. Department of Labor 1919: 79), "The planters in the immediate vicinity of these lynchings attributed the movement from their places to the fact that the lynching parties had terrorized their Negroes." Another notorious lynching, in South Carolina, was followed by increased out-migration of blacks from the area around Abbeville (Ballard 1984; Scott 1920); Raper (1933) mentions similar cases. Also, black migrants themselves mentioned the fear of violence as a reason for leaving their homes. For example, one migrant (cited in Henri 1975: 130) wrote eloquently to the *Chicago Defender*, "After twenty years of seeing my people lynched for any offense from spitting on a

sidewalk to stealing a mule, I made up my mind that I would turn the prow of my ship toward the part of the country where the people at least made a pretense at being civilized.”

Even the “civilized” institutions of southern society victimized blacks and represented a lethal threat. The legal web of Jim Crow and de jure second-class status of blacks, along with their cultural imperatives of racial hatred and inferiority, guaranteed that the criminal justice system would be biased against blacks. With little access to legal defense, blacks often were subject to summary trials, which all too often resulted in a death sentence. Raper (1933: 19) saw little to distinguish many legal executions of blacks from death through mob violence: “It is not incorrect to call a death sentence under such circumstances a ‘legal lynching.’” This conclusion was also reached by President Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights (Shapiro 1988: 368).

It is important to recognize that black flight from racial violence could have fostered internal movement within the South, as well as out-migration from the South. For instance, we know that black lynchings were primarily a rural phenomenon. Although lynchings were not unknown in southern cities, the risk of mob violence was considerably greater for blacks living in the countryside (Raper 1933; White 1969 [1929]). Thus, by encouraging rural-to-urban movement, the climate of terror created by lynchings may have contributed to the substantial urbanization of the southern black population that occurred between 1880 and 1930. Alternatively, some rural blacks may have left areas of serious mob violence for other, more benign, rural southern locales.

While it seems plausible that the violent atmosphere surrounding southern blacks contributed to their willingness to migrate, previous efforts to assess the impact of this atmosphere on migration have revealed little support for such a relationship. According to Johnson (1923: 272), “Persecution plays its part—a considerable one. But when the whole of the migration of southern Negroes is considered, this part seems to be limited.” This somewhat contradictory conclusion is based on two key observations: (1) that counties with many lynchings were as likely to experience *increases* in black population as they were to experience population losses; and (2) that county-level patterns in white migration closely paralleled those for black migration. Johnson’s conclusion that persecution was secondary to economic forces as a cause of

black migration subsequently has been widely cited as evidence that lynchings were not an important cause of migration (Fligstein 1981; Kennedy 1930). For example, in their comprehensive review of black migration Johnson and Campbell (1981: 66) write, "One of the more important and controversial aspects of his [C. S. Johnson's (1923)] survey was the finding that there was no correlation between racial persecution and migration."

It is difficult to know how much confidence to place in Johnson's "empirical" observations. Even he acknowledged that his analysis represented a "working test" based on "rough correlation" (Johnson 1923: 274). There are additional reasons to consider his evidence less than definitive. First, it is not clear upon which counties his investigation was based. Second, his simple bivariate observations cannot do justice to the complex processes connecting black migration to the social and economic environment (as represented in Figure 2). Finally, the similarities between white and black migration patterns do not rule out the possibility that each responded to somewhat different causal mechanisms.

Fligstein (1981) has conducted a more sophisticated examination of the impact of racial persecution on black migration. Along with several other variables (see our earlier discussion), Fligstein includes lynching as a predictor of black migration between 1900 and 1930. For each of the three decades Fligstein's findings show a negative, though statistically insignificant, relationship between lynching and net migration.⁵ In light of these results, Fligstein concludes that lynching was not an important determinant of county-level black migration patterns.

Since Fligstein was not primarily interested in an examination of the role of racial violence, it is not surprising that his analysis cannot be considered definitive. First, the NAACP's inventory of lynchings (Fligstein's source) has been demonstrated to have serious weaknesses (Tolnay et al. 1989). Second, Fligstein's lynching variable measures only whether a county experienced a lynching during the decade for which migration was measured. This measurement strategy overlooks the possibility that a climate of racial violence accumulated over a longer historical period; moreover, it assumes that a single lynching had the same impact as three, four, or more lynchings. Third, Fligstein's analysis does not consider the possibility of a reciprocal negative impact of out-migration on subsequent lynchings (as hypothesized in Figure 2).⁶ While this

possible relationship is discussed further below, it should be noted here that its existence may have attenuated the strength of the association between lynching and migration inferred by Fligstein.

Not only is there a lack of previous empirical support for a significant link between racial violence and migration, but other scholars have pointed out an apparent logical inadequacy in arguments which suggest such a link. For instance, Higgs (1976) points out that southern blacks historically had been exposed to discrimination and abuse. Thus, he argues that this constant condition of racial harassment is an unlikely explanation of the sharp increase in black migration after 1900. Moreover, Scroggs (1917: 1041) notes that lynchings were on the decline after 1910, precisely the same time that black migration rose dramatically. Both of these observations are accurate: racial harassment had existed in the South for decades, and lynching did decline in intensity after 1910. However, neither observation necessarily contradicts the basic framework developed in this essay.

To appreciate this point, it is important to distinguish between longitudinal trends and cross-sectional variation in racial violence and migration. Racial violence had characterized the South for decades before the Great Migration; thus it is unlikely that racial violence can explain the timing of the Great Migration. Rather, the timing of the black exodus is probably better explained by the awakening of northern employers to the potential for exploiting cheap black labor, and by the sharp plunge in the number of European immigrants during and after World War I. However, as illustrated in Figure 1, once the Great Migration was underway, the exodus from southern counties was not uniform across the South. Certain areas in the South experienced considerably more out-migration than others. It is this cross-sectional variation in migration that we are suggesting may have been caused partially by corresponding cross-sectional variation in violence against blacks.

Furthermore, once attention is shifted to a cross-sectional concern, Scroggs's (1917) observation that lynchings declined after 1910 seems less problematic, especially since lynchings and legal executions both proceeded at a very vigorous pace after the turn of the twentieth century. Table 2 shows the numbers of lynchings and executions in Georgia and South Carolina, by decade, from 1890 to 1930. Clearly, the level of lethal violence against

Table 2 Lynchings and executions in Georgia and South Carolina by decade, 1882–1930

Decade	Georgia		South Carolina	
	Lynchings	Executions	Lynchings	Executions
1882–1889	53	53	28	48
1890–1899	116	109	52	57
1900–1909	97	112	33	32
1910–1919	125	78	20	52
1920–1930	41	45	13	28

blacks was substantial in these two states, even after 1900. In fact, Georgia experienced its most intensive decade of lynching between 1910 and 1920. Thus, a lack of coincidence between the high point of lynchings for the South as a whole (1890s) and the exodus of blacks from the South (after 1910) does not necessarily contradict our hypothesis, which links *spatial* patterns of black migration and corresponding patterns of racial violence.

Considering the plausibility of an association between racial violence and the Great Migration, and the failure of prior efforts adequately to assess the strength of such an association, it seems clear that additional inquiry is warranted. While an exhaustive empirical examination of the causal processes hypothesized in Figure 2 is beyond the scope of this essay, we can offer preliminary evidence consistent with our hypothesized effect of racial violence on black migration. Figure 3 describes the relationship between the number of lynchings that occurred in the counties of Georgia and South Carolina between 1882 and 1920, and out-migration of blacks from those same counties between 1920 and 1930.⁷ It shows a very striking relationship between migration and lynching in Georgia and South Carolina. For instance, counties in which more than five blacks were lynched experienced an average out-migration rate of 29 per 100 black population. At the other extreme, counties with at most one black lynching lost only 23 per 100 black population during the 1920s. Moreover, the black out-migration rate rose consistently with the intensity of black lynchings between 1882 and 1920.

The tentative nature of this evidence must be stressed. Figure 3 describes a simple bivariate association which does not consider the role of other social and economic forces that may have affected

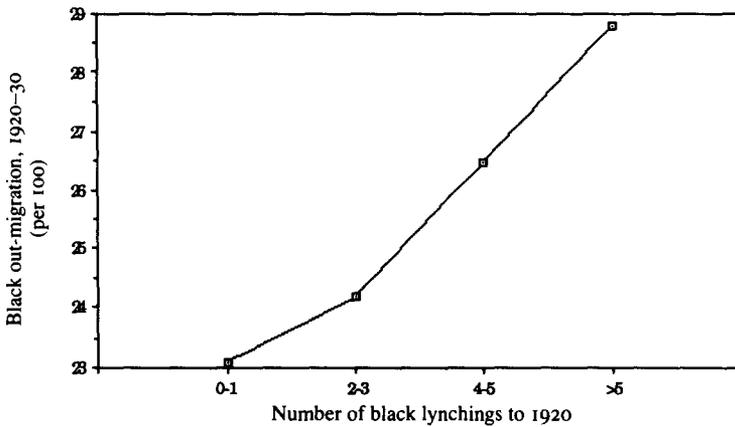


Figure 3 Effect of lynchings to 1920 on mean black out-migration in Georgia and South Carolina, 1920-30. Sources: Lynchings: see note 7; executions: data file obtained from Espy (n.d.).

both racial violence and black migration. Moreover, specification of the temporal relationship between lynching and migration is rather crude and ignores the possibility of nearly simultaneous effects of lynchings in the 1920s on migration during the same decade. Still, this evidence does provide tantalizing support for our conceptual framework.

Black Out-Migration and Reduced Lethal Violence

By the turn of the twentieth century the southern economy had become extremely dependent upon cheap black labor. As the black exodus intensified, the economic impact of the loss of labor began to be felt. Henri (1975: 70) noted that “as the trains and boats pulled out week after week and month after month, the South began to hurt from a loss of the black labor force, especially the Deep South.” In response, southern planters and employers mounted a desperate attempt to stem the labor hemorrhage. At first, their effort consisted of coercive measures. Migrants were intimidated, threatened, and otherwise abused; labor agents were taxed, beaten, and lynched.

When coercion proved ineffective, some southern communities turned to enticement. If blacks were migrating because they were unhappy or mistreated, then one solution was to make them

feel more comfortable. In some areas, wages rose in response to the black exodus (Scott 1920: 86; Scroggs 1917: 103). In other areas, local elites saw an increasing need to improve the plight of local blacks. For instance, a report by the U.S. Department of Labor (1919: 32) observed:

They see in the growing need for Negro labor so powerful an appeal to the self-interest of the white employer and the white planter as to make it possible to get an influential white group to exert itself actively to provide better schools; to insure full settlements between landlord and tenant on all plantations by the end of the year; to bring about abolition of the abuses in the courts of justice of the peace.

Importantly, it appears that in some cases local white elites were even willing to call for a reduction in the level of violent persecution of the subordinate caste. Scott (1920: 94) referred to such a trend: “The tendency to maltreat the negroes without cause, the custom of arresting them for petty offenses and the institution of lynching have all been somewhat checked by this change in the attitude of the southern white man towards the negro.”

Historically, southern blacks have used their labor value to extract concessions from the white majority—even if unintentionally. After Emancipation, blacks “took advantage” of a labor-starved southern economy to prevent the perpetuation of a slave-like “gang labor” agricultural system (Ransom and Sutch 1977). It was through compromise that the tenancy and sharecropping system emerged in southern agriculture. We are suggesting that blacks again “exploited” their increased labor value during the era of heavy migration. That is, faced with the loss of their cheap labor force, and with no real alternative, southern planters and employers began to perceive the benefits of a less hostile and exploitive environment for blacks. Naturally, we would expect to find the emergence of this sentiment to have been more prominent in areas suffering greater losses of black population.

Our argument that black migration had a reciprocal effect on racial violence has to this point focused primarily on the perspective of the southern white elite. However, it would be naive to believe that the South was monolithic in its response to black migration and the loss of black labor. In fact, there is good reason to suspect that reactions to the black exodus were split along class

lines. Edna Bonacich's (1972, 1975) "split labor market" theory of antagonistic ethnic relations is useful for developing this important point. According to Bonacich, blacks were one of three class groups represented in the southern economy; the other two were white planters and employers, and white laborers. Planters and employers were dependent upon cheap black labor, while the higher-priced white laborers were in competition with black labor. White laborers had everything to gain from the exodus of blacks from the South, but planters and employers had much to lose, as described above (Holmes 1969).

Competition between white and black southern labor had intensified considerably during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The growing rural population overburdened southern land (Myrdal 1972; Wilson 1978), and more and more white farmers were reduced to tenancy. As a result, despite their membership in the dominant caste, more rural whites began to share the blacks' disadvantaged economic position. And for the first time, sizable numbers of southern white farmers found themselves in direct economic competition with southern black farmers. To the extent that the migration of blacks from southern counties removed economic competitors, then, poorer whites improved their position *vis-à-vis* white planters and employers.⁸

William Holmes (1969) presents clear evidence of this effect in the case of Mississippi, where many borderline white farmers organized to terrorize black farmers and tenants into leaving. Because of the crop-lien system, it was not uncommon for merchants to become landed gentry through foreclosure, then to hire black tenants and sharecroppers to work the cotton fields. This had two immediate effects: first, to reduce the number of small landholding white farmers, and secondly, to replace white tenants with more easily controlled black tenants (*ibid.*). These actions were detrimental to the economic interests of both borderline landholding and landless whites and, as Holmes has demonstrated, did not go unchallenged, with much violence directed at offending blacks.

In sum, it is unlikely that planters and employers, who suffered from the loss of black laborers, and poor marginal whites, who competed with them, responded similarly to black migration. While the former may have attempted to moderate grievances held by blacks, the latter had little motivation to do so. The social and

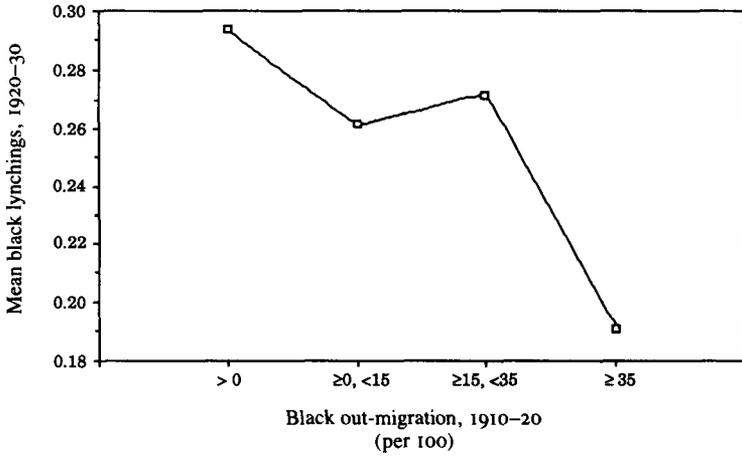


Figure 4 Effect of black out-migration, 1910-20, on lynchings, 1920-30, in Georgia and South Carolina

economic composition of the white community becomes, then, a critical factor in understanding the push forces behind the black exodus as well as the community's responses to it. This potential is represented in Figure 2 by the arrow running from "White Class Structure" to the downward arrow connecting black out-migration with lethal violence against blacks.

Again, although an in-depth empirical exploration is premature, we can provide simple descriptive evidence supportive of the hypothesized reciprocal influence of black migration on the level of lethal violence. Once more restricting our focus to the counties of Georgia and South Carolina, Figure 4 describes the effect of black out-migration between 1910 and 1920 on subsequent black lynchings between 1920 and 1930. By altering the time periods from those used in Figure 3, we are attempting to avoid possible simultaneity bias in the relationship between migration and racial violence.⁹ The evidence suggests that heavy out-migration of blacks may have had an ameliorative effect on racial violence. For example, counties that experienced an out-migration rate over 35 per 100 blacks between 1910 and 1920 averaged less than 0.2 lynchings during the next 10 years. On the other hand, counties that experienced no black out-migration (or even net in-migration) maintained relatively high levels of racial violence—nearly 0.3

lynchings between 1920 and 1930 on average. The evidence presented in Figure 4 bears the same caveats mentioned in relation to Figure 3. But it also provides intriguing information which suggests that our conceptual framework warrants more intensive empirical attention.

CONCLUSION

In this essay we have argued that prior treatments of black migration have prematurely neglected racial violence as a force contributing to the migration of blacks from the South and to internal migration within the South. While we do not claim that the impact of violence on migration was greater than the influence of economic forces, we do believe it was more powerful than previously assumed. Moreover, we have proposed a reciprocal relationship between black migration and racial violence against blacks during the first part of the twentieth century. That is, not only did southern blacks choose to leave areas in which they had been exposed to high levels of lethal violence, but the exodus of blacks motivated southern whites to reduce the level of racial violence.

The historical legitimacy of this conceptual framework is demonstrated through an examination of the social and economic context within which the Great Migration occurred. Lynching was an important mechanism of social control as whites sought to keep blacks in their subservient and impoverished position in southern society. And southern blacks obviously feared lynch mobs and their vicious attempts to impose popular justice. Many blacks responded to this threat by fleeing to less violent surroundings. Once southern blacks began to leave the region in large numbers, however, some whites recognized the disruptive effect the exodus was having on the southern economy. For decades southern employers had taken for granted the availability of cheap black labor; when their supply was threatened, they acted in their own interests to stanch the flow of black labor to the North.

Preliminary empirical evidence presented in Figures 3 and 4 is consistent with our hypotheses and suggests that our conceptual framework has sufficient merit to justify closer consideration. Simple bivariate analyses indicate that, among counties in Georgia and South Carolina, blacks were more likely to leave areas of more frequent lynching, and that heavy out-migration was asso-

ciated with lower levels of racial violence in following years. Naturally, these simple bivariate relationships cannot be taken as proof positive that a tradition of racial violence increased black mobility or that extensive out-migration led to a decline in the use of racial violence against southern blacks. Before definitive conclusions can be drawn, empirical investigations of our conceptual framework must be extended to a broader geographic area and to a more extensive set of social and economic variables. An adequate test of the conceptual framework developed in this essay will require a major research initiative; however, the possibility of “rewriting” the conventional wisdom regarding the dynamics of the Great Migration will justify that initiative.

NOTES

- 1 The net migration estimates represented on this map were generated using a forward census survival rate method (Shryock and Siegel 1980: 630–34). It is the same method used by Neil Fligstein (1981) for the estimates of net migration. A more detailed description of this indirect technique for estimating net migration is presented in a later section of this essay. Figure 1 describes the rate of net migration but reveals nothing about the *destinations* of migrants.
- 2 It is probably safe to ignore cross-county variation in the attractiveness or availability of employment opportunities in the North as an explanation for the county-level variation displayed in Figure 1. Of course, some southern counties may have had stronger ties with northern urban areas through the prior migration of family members or friends (e.g., Ballard 1984).
- 3 In addition to push and pull factors, theoretical treatments of migration often mention “obstacles” to, or “costs” of, relocation that can discourage potential migrants. One mechanism operating during the Great Migration to *reduce* such impediments was an expanding network of family and friends who had already relocated. Such networks provided valuable information about potential destinations and eased the arrival and transition of new migrants. For example, Ballard (1984) describes an important connection between previous migrants to Philadelphia and residents of the area around Abbeville, South Carolina. Although an important dimension to the Great Migration, this issue is somewhat outside the specific focus of this essay.
- 4 Traditionally, the cotton states are considered to be Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina.
- 5 A negative effect of lynching on net migration may seem to contradict our hypothesis. However, it should be recognized that a positive value of net migration means that a county gained population through migration. A negative value implies a loss of population via migration. Thus, a negative effect of lynching on net migration actually indicates that more lynchings were associated with out-migration (or with lower levels of in-migration).

- 6 These points should not be interpreted as criticisms of Fligstein's analysis, since it was not his purpose to conduct a full-fledged investigation of the association between racial persecution and migration.
- 7 The county-level data used in Figures 3 and 4 for lynchings in Georgia and South Carolina come from a recent project to create an inventory of lynchings for the entire Deep South between 1882 and 1930. Three separate enumerations of lynch victims served as the raw material for the lynching inventory: (1) the NAACP's inventories beginning in 1889 and ending in the 1940s (see, e.g., NAACP 1919); (2) the Chicago *Tribune's* annual list of lynch victims, published between 1882 and 1918; and (3) a list compiled by the Tuskegee University Archives for the period 1882 to 1964 (Williams 1968). Unfortunately, there are serious problems with each of these inventories (see, e.g., Beck et al. 1989; Tolnay et al. 1989). Therefore they were combined to produce a complete listing of all known lynchings included in public sources. Then each of these incidents and the details about them were verified through contemporary reports published in nearby newspapers. The product of this effort was a *confirmed* inventory of southern lynchings which includes the following information about each event: state, county, exact date, race of victim, sex of victim, and reported reason. While we do not claim that this inventory is exhaustive, we are certain of its superiority over other public inventories.

The county-level net migration rates presented in Figures 3 and 4 were estimated using a forward census survival rate method (Fligstein 1981: Appendix C; Shryock and Siegel 1980: 630–34). In brief, an observed population for some point in time is compared with the expected population for the same time. The expected population is estimated by surviving forward the population for some earlier point in time. The difference between the two represents net migration.

If we take the period 1920–30 as an example, then

$$M_{1920-30} = P_{1930} - (S)(P_{1920}),$$

where $M_{1920-30}$ is the net migration between 1920 and 1930, P_{1930} is the observed population size in 1930, S is the survival probability between 1920 and 1930, and P_{1920} is the observed population size in 1920. And the net migration rate, $NM_{1920-30}$, is derived as follows:

$$NM_{1920-30} = (M_{1920-30} / P_{1920}) \times 100.$$

The actual computational procedure is made more complex by an effort to be as precise as possible by allowing for separate survival probabilities for different age groups, for males and females, and for urban and rural residents. A more detailed description of the measurement of net migration is available from the authors.

- 8 Bloom (1987) disagrees with Bonacich's (1972) assumption that black and white laborers were in direct competition. He adopts a more traditional Marxist interpretation of the sources of racial antagonism by locating them primarily within the white elite.
- 9 Future efforts to model the reciprocal relationship hypothesized in this essay between migration and racial violence will require careful temporal specifi-

cation. For instance, did a historical tradition of lynchings in an area spur out-migration, or was recent violence more salient? Furthermore, while a lagged effect of racial violence on migration (or vice versa) can be specified and estimated, it ignores the possibility of nearly simultaneous effects between the two social forces.

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