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“The Problem Alike of Statesman, Race Leader, and Philanthropist”: Economic Thinking and the Division of Negro Economics

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In 1917, the US Department of Labor launched a new section: the Division of Negro Economics (DNE). Established to study black labor in the context of the Great Migration and staffed completely by black social scientists and social workers, the division offers a window onto the origins and meaning of black economics in the United States. During an age of pervasive scientific racism, the division's leaders leveraged the language and tools of academic economics to assert black Americans' fundamental humanity, particularly by rendering black migrants as economic agents. The history of the division reveals how black economic thinkers made the economic study of the Great Migration into an egalitarian intellectual project, even if they could not escape institutional bias and prejudice. It stands as a lesson on the potential of economics, both as a tool of oppression and as one of political claims-making.

In mid-1918, George Edmund Haynes, the first black person to get a Ph.D. from Columbia, wrote W. E. B. Du Bois a letter. Haynes had just started work at the Department of Labor. The conditions were difficult. Woodrow Wilson had recently resegregated the federal government and the position of black Washingtonians was under assault. Yet Haynes's letter was full of optimism. His colleagues had a “cooperative attitude”; the Secretary and assistant secretary bore a “most cordial and liberal” attitude toward his work. Haynes was especially heartened that they regarded “the purpose and relation of the Department to Negro wage earners no differently from that of other wage earners.”¹ For Haynes, such an attitude was obvious. Black and white workers were fundamentally similar, even if they confronted different socioeconomic realities.

¹Haynes to W. E. B. Du Bois, 11 May 1918, Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts Amherst, at <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/pageturn/mums312-b013-i146/#page/1/mode/1up>.

Haynes's hopeful attitude was important for the uphill battles he would wage in his new job as director of the new Division of Negro Economics (DNE). The division, launched by progressive Secretary of Labor W. B. Wilson shortly after the US entry into World War I, was a "wartime service." It was meant "to harmonize the labor relations of white workers, Negro workers, and white employers, and thereby to promote the welfare of all wage-earners in the United States."² Established to study black labor and staffed completely by black social scientists and social workers, the division offers a window onto the origins and meaning of black economics in the United States. Its story exposes a vital chapter in the history of economic thinking, one that highlights how black thinkers strategically deployed the rhetoric of economics.

Operating from within the racist Wilson presidential administration, Haynes and others at the Division of Negro Economics built a state apparatus to study and help black Americans. During an age of pervasive scientific racism, they leveraged the language and tools of the emergent discipline of economics to assert black Americans' fundamental humanity. The operatives of the DNE explicitly rendered the Great Migration in economic terms and black migrants as economic agents. In so doing, they insisted on a fundamental shared humanity between black and white people. People, black and white, sought to better themselves. Differences between them were not intrinsic, but rather lay in differing historical circumstances. The division's story reveals a larger intellectual history: how black economic thinkers made the economic study of the Great Migration into a politically egalitarian intellectual project, even if they could not escape bias and prejudice in reality. It stands as a lesson on the potential of economics, both as a tool of oppression and as one of political claims-making. In particular, it demonstrates how the assumption of economic rationality built into *homo economicus* could be purposefully and strategically leveraged for egalitarian purposes, used to reckon with and modify what Charles W. Mills has called "racial liberalism."³

The Division of Negro Economics was a federal response to the Great Migration. As hundreds of thousands of black southerners moved north, white employers in the South worried about losing low-wage labor and organized labor in the North worried about competition for high-paying jobs. Officials in Washington fretted about distortions to the wartime economy. Many black intellectuals and community leaders anxiously followed the "adjustment" of a wave of poor migrants to new conditions in northern cities. The DNE was meant to soothe all those anxieties.

For many black intellectuals, including the DNE's director, George E. Haynes, the DNE also represented a chance for black workers to gain an advocate and protector in Washington, an official agency that might ease transitions, safeguard rights, and foster employment opportunities. Haynes was deeply concerned with the economics of the Great Migration. And whereas white employers were simply looking to keep labor costs down, Haynes and his colleagues sought to place black workers in good jobs and help "adjustment" to northern life in ways that would work toward social parity while

²W. B. Wilson to Haynes, 1 July 1919, Records of the Division of Negro Economics (hereafter DNE), 174.4.7, Misc. [Wilson, W. B.], National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA).

³Charles W. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford, 2017).

not deepening racial antagonisms. Though they were elite figures, interested in social propriety and uplift, they were nevertheless deeply interested in the economic lives of black migrants.⁴ For though pragmatic social work was central to Haynes's practice of economics, so too was academic economics. Haynes was an economist. His work as an economist and as the "director of Negro Economics" helps map the meaning of the term "Negro economics," not just as a study of black people at work, but also as a scientific endeavor practiced by a group of black thinkers in the early twentieth century. For them, it was at once a statistically driven approach premised on the racial equality of economic agents, and an applied science of social work, one that could leverage economic data and economic rhetoric into tangible social change.

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Black economic thinkers have been chronically overlooked in historical writing, particularly *as* economists. When W. E. B. Du Bois is celebrated as a social scientist, it is typically as a sociologist, rather than as an economist.⁵ Until recently, Sadie Alexander, the first black person to receive a Ph.D. in economics in the United States, was ignored altogether. Alexander, blackballed out of the academy because of her race and gender, never worked as a professional economist as such. Yet, as Nina Banks has pointed out, this is hardly a reason for historians to avoid treating Alexander *as* an economist.⁶

This article contends that the same should go for other black thinkers in the early twentieth century, especially those typically considered sociologists, like George E. Haynes.⁷ The history of economic thought encompasses far more people than those who were labeled "economists" in their own time.⁸ In the early twentieth-century United States, the line between sociology and economics was vanishingly faint. Economists and sociologists engaged in similar methods, and asked similar questions. This was especially true of work on labor. And because of the intertwined histories of slavery, sharecropping, and the Great Migration, labor (along with "criminality") was the focus of most social-scientific work on black Americans.⁹ This work was fundamentally economic.

⁴Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

⁵Robert E. Prasch, "W. E. B. Du Bois's Contributions to U.S. Economics (1893–1910)," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 5/2 (2008), 309–24. See also, Jonathan Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919–1941* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 88.

⁶Nina Banks, ed., *Democracy, Race, and Justice: The Speeches and Writings of Sadie T. M. Alexander* (New Haven, 2021). On Alexander as lawyer see Kenneth Mack, "A Social History of Everyday Practice: Sadie T. M. Alexander and the Incorporation of Black Women into the American Legal Profession, 1925–60," *Cornell Law Review* 87 (2002), 1405–74.

⁷This article follows the work of James B. Stewart, who connected Haynes's work to economics in the 1990s. See James B. Stewart, "The Rise and Fall of Negro Economics: The Economic Thought of George Edmund Haynes," *American Economic Review* 18/2 (1991), 311–14; and Stewart, "George Edmund Haynes and the Office of Negro Economics," in Thomas D. Boston, ed., *A Different Vision: African American Economic Thought*, vol. 1 (New York, 1997), 213–30.

⁸See e.g. Cléo Chassonnery-Zaïgouche, Evelyn Forget, and John D. Singleton, *Women and Economics: New Historical Perspectives*, Annual Supplement, *History of Political Economy* (2022).

⁹Francille Rusan Wilson, *The Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientists and the Creation of Black Labor Studies, 1890–1950* (Charlottesville, 2006).

Labor was a central “problem” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So too, at least in the United States, was blackness itself.¹⁰ It was the so-called “Negro problem” that prompted W. E. B. Du Bois to ask in an 1897 *Atlantic* article, “how does it feel to be a problem?”¹¹ At the turn of the century, American economists, inspired by the German historical school’s emphasis on social remediation, understood their role as helping to solve such social problems. But what did a solution look like? When Du Bois posed his question in *The Atlantic* in 1897, it concerned the perceived “backwardness” of rural black southerners. Writing nine years later in Max Weber’s *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, Du Bois described *die Negerfrage* (the “Negro question”) in terms of black success. Here, Du Bois noted that the problem’s source was “racial antipathy”; the question concerned the black American’s “struggle for his human rights.”¹² For the accommodationist Booker T. Washington, the solution lay less with white people than with black ones. To be successful, black Americans had to “learn the secrets of civilization.”¹³ But “success” was a slippery term. Wealth and income mattered, but so too (at least for Washington) did a classist moral metric implicit in calls for uplift and education.¹⁴ The reduction of prejudice and the dismantling of physical and psychological apparatuses of oppression also mattered. For Du Bois, these were prerequisites for creating new norms and institutions conducive to black freedom and safety. Whatever success meant, it fell to economists and other social scientists to both define and effectuate it.

Yet on the race or “negro question,” social scientists offered a wide range of recommendations. In particular, there was a growing distinction between biological and social interventions. Whereas “scientific” racism had dominated the American academy in the nineteenth century, in the early twentieth century a growing number of sociologists were rejecting inherent racial difference as an explanation for observed differences in the socioeconomic position of black and white Americans. Sociologists, influenced by Franz Boas, moved toward a culturalist understanding of both racial difference and the difference in the socioeconomic conditions experienced by racial groups in the United States. By contrast, economists guiding the American Economic Association (AEA), including Walter Wilcox and John R. Commons, clung to more overt biological, racialist positions. Wilcox, in particular, was responsible for the AEA publishing a series of notoriously racist tracts, including Frederick Hoffman’s

¹⁰Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, 2019); Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896–1954* (Berkeley, 1998).

¹¹W. E. B. Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *The Atlantic*, Aug. 1897, at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446.

¹²W. E. B. Du Bois, “Die Negerfrage in den Vereinigten Staaten,” *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 22 (1906), 31–79, at 78. See also Du Bois, “Die Negerfrage in den Vereinigten Staaten,” tr. Joseph Fracchia, *The New Centennial Review* 6/3 (2006), 241–90. Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*. Thomas Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton, 2016).

¹³Booker T. Washington, “Industrial Education for the Negro,” in Washington, *The Negro Problem* (1903), at <https://guttenberg.org/cache/epub/15041/pg15041-images.html>.

¹⁴Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*.

Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro, which deployed crime statistics to associate blackness with criminality.¹⁵

This is essential background for grappling with what was meant by black or “Negro economics” in the early twentieth century. Unlike Hoffman, who interpreted statistics to make conclusions about racial types, Haynes and his network of social scientists and investigators used social science to demonstrate the fundamental equality of people across races. The answers to “the Negro question” were to be found in social conditions, not in biological difference. The economic thinking of black Americans was not fundamentally different from that of other Americans. Economic stimuli, economic phenomena, *economics* itself, applied equally to black and white individuals and communities.

At the same time, Haynes and his colleagues were inescapably attuned to the material and social inequality experienced by black Americans. Closing that gap demanded direct action. For Du Bois, a founder of the NAACP, action took the form of civil rights activism. For Haynes, a founder of the National Urban League, it meant social work. “Negro economics” was concerned with debunking biological racist hierarchies and actively remediating social inequalities. In both tasks, collecting social data—social facts—was vital. Haynes was devoted to “facts.” He contended that “you will make the best headway with both races by presenting objectively the facts and conditions relating to both sides.” After all, “a great deal of our maladjustment comes from misinformation or lack of information and misunderstanding or lack of understanding.”¹⁶ Racism was more than a mere misunderstanding, but Haynes insisted that misconceptions about natural inferiority could be ameliorated through the presentation of scientific facts, particularly that racial inequality was not biologically determined. A culturalist, Haynes argued that racial inequality stemmed from circumstance and prejudice. Its remediation could therefore be effected through social-scientific intervention.¹⁷ Statistics and social work: these were the two pillars that supported Haynes’s economic thinking.

The Division of Negro Economics: black economics and the state

Haynes’s “Negro economics” was thus a science that both studied and intervened. It did so especially with regard to one of the most transformational social and demographic events of the twentieth century: the Great Migration. Between the world wars, two million black southerners moved north, remaking urban and black America. As they did, southern employers confronted the loss of cheap labor. “If the Negroes go,” an Alabama cotton farmer asked the readers of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, “where shall we get labor to take their place?”¹⁸ In Washington, the Department of Labor was flooded with letters demanding action. A representative of the Southern States Phosphate and

¹⁵Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*, Chs. 2, 3. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers*, Ch. 7; Wilson, *Segregated Scholars*, 72–4.

¹⁶Haynes to R. H. Leavell, 13 Jan. 1921, DNE, 174.4.7, [Correspondence] L, NARA.

¹⁷Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*; Wilson, *Segregated Scholars*.

¹⁸Cited in Henry P. Guzda, “Social Experiment of the Labor Department: The Division of Negro Economics,” *Public Historian* 4/4 (1982), 7–37, at 10.

Fertilizer Company urged it to do something about “the serious labor conditions of the South, on account of negro migration.” From Mississippi, white supremacist governor Theodore Bilbo pressed Secretary of Labor William Wilson to prevent northern employers from “luring Black labor away from the South.”¹⁹ Northern unions were similarly concerned. Samuel Gompers, the antiblack head of the American Federation of Labor, wrote to Wilson to report the alarming activities of agents recruiting southern black labor for northern factories, displacing white union members.²⁰

Department of Labor officials responded cautiously. Assistant Secretary Louis Post, a veteran of the Freedman’s Bureau who had been involved in the 1909 foundation of the NAACP, was skeptical that migration was wreaking economic havoc. To check, in 1917, he dispatched two black researchers on a tour of the country.²¹ Charles Hall and William Jennifer, both on loan from the newly segregated Department of Commerce, reported that the migration threatened neither the South’s economic output nor the North’s labor market.²² These conclusions were confirmed by an extensive study the next year. “The lack of labor at the North, due mainly to the ceasing of immigration from Europe,” created an opportunity, the study concluded. The migration was driven by “the natural and healthy desire” of the black worker to “better himself.”²³

In the 1910s and 1920s, the dominant view among social observers, both black and white, was that the Great Migration was an *economic* phenomenon. Its cause lay with economic pull factors, rather than with social push factors (whether Jim Crow laws, racist hatred, lynchings, fears, or resentments). As Haynes asserted in his 1912 Ph.D. dissertation, black people moved to New York City because of simple economics. When asked “their reasons for coming to New York,” 47.1 percent of respondents (an overwhelming plurality) “gave answers that are easily classified as economic”—including to “get work,” to secure “better wages,” to “better my condition,” and because they traveled with former employers.²⁴ Investigating the Great Migration necessitated a study in *economic* behavior rather than a study in *social* behavior or crisis. It was also a study in *human* behavior, rather than black behavior. The black migrant was “like other wage earners”: motivated by “the desire for higher wages and the thought of larger liberty.”²⁵

¹⁹Southern States Phosphate Company to Louis Post, 25 May 1917; Theodore Bilbo to William Wilson, 6 June 1917, File 16/433, RG 174, NARA, cited in Guzda, “Social Experiment,” 11. On labor agents see Khayen Prentice, László Kónya, and David Prentice, “Was the African American Great Migration Delayed by Outlawing Emigrant Agents?,” *Essays in Economic and Business History* 37 (2019), 43–75.

²⁰Samuel Gompers to William B. Wilson, 19 Jan. 1917, 174.3.1, File 13/65, NARA.

²¹Dominic Candeloro, “Louis Post as a Carpetbagger in South Carolina: Reconstruction as a Forerunner of the Progressive Movement,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 34/4 (1975), 423–32.

²²Charles Hall and William Jennifer, report to the Secretary of Labor on Negro migration 1915–1916, File 13/65, NARA 174. Eric Yellin, *Racism in the Nation’s Service* (Chapel Hill, 2013), 128–30.

²³The report’s author was James Dillard, the white manager of the Jeanes and Slater Funds. US Department of Labor, *Negro Migration in 1916–17* (Washington, DC, 1919), at https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/files/docs/publications/dne/dne_migration1916-1917.pdf.

²⁴George E. Haynes, *The Negro at Work in New York City: A Study in Economic Progress* (New York, 1912), 26–7. Cf. Stewart, “George Edmund Haynes,” 216.

²⁵Haynes, *The Negro at Work in New York City*, 142. Haynes noted that for a subset of thirty-seven men interviewed, wages jumped from around six dollars to ten dollars after coming to New York.

At the same time, the Great Migration created social frictions that were obvious subjects for sociological study. Migrants struggled to find jobs, housing, and basic sustenance. Moreover, the arrival of tens of thousands of poor sharecroppers heightened existing racial tensions in northern cities. Starting in 1916, a variety of black civic organizations, including the Urban League, the Tuskegee Institute, and the NAACP, lobbied the Department of Labor to engage more proactively with black workers in the North.²⁶ By early 1918, after the United States entered World War I, administrators took heed, for reasons less of social welfare than of labor economics. “Although race recognition,” Louis Post wrote to Secretary William B. Wilson, was “of minor importance,” it was “an absolute necessity” to deal with black workers. They were too “large a body of American wage workingmen” to ignore in the context of wartime mobilization.²⁷ Post suggested creating a new group to advise on black labor. The result was the Division of Negro Economics. To head it, Wilson and Post appointed a widely respected economist, sociologist, and social worker: George E. Haynes.

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For Department of Labor administrators, Haynes had two attractive attributes. First, he was a social scientist: one of the few academics working on black urban labor. Second, as a founder of the National Urban League, Haynes was a moderate with a prodigious network, both black and white.²⁸

Few could argue with Haynes’s academic credentials. Born to formerly enslaved parents in Arkansas, Haynes attended Fisk and Yale, where he impressed the sociologist William Graham Sumner “by the zeal + success with wh. he did his work.”²⁹ After working in a University of Chicago psychology laboratory, in 1909 he enrolled jointly in the New York School of Philanthropy (NYSP), a private school to train social workers, and in Columbia’s doctoral program in Social Economy, which drew from sociology and economics.³⁰ Haynes’s cross-registration was reflective of the changing status of social work itself. Long treated as the domain of amateur do-gooders, in the late nineteenth century social work was reinventing itself as a profession backed up by scientific research.³¹

As Haynes shuttled between Columbia and the NYSP, he grew close to his statistically minded professors, inspired by their “interest, advice and sympathy.” Haynes was a skilled academic. Even before completing coursework (including with economist E.

²⁶Eugene Knickle Jones to Louis Post, 13 Feb. 1918, 174.3.5, 8/102-A, NARA; Frederica Harrison Barrow, “The Social Welfare Career and Contributions of Forrester Blanchard Washington: A Life Course Analysis” (Ph.D. dissertation, School of Social Work, Howard University, Washington, DC, 2001), 148.

²⁷Louis Post to W. B. Wilson, 13 Feb. 1918, 174.3.5, 8/102-A, ff. 40-1, NARA.

²⁸See Wilson, *Segregated Scholars*, 127–30; and correspondence in 174.3.5, 8/102-A, NARA. See also Giles B. Jackson, brief, Oct. 1919, DNE, [Correspondence], 174.4.7, NARA.

²⁹William Sumner, 29 April 1909, JWJ 101 Box 4, Folder 19, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

³⁰George Haynes Alumni Federation Card, 1912, UA#0050, Box 16, Columbia University Archives (CUA). Robert W. Wallace, “Starting a Department and Getting It under Way: Sociology at Columbia University, 1891–1914,” *Minerva* 30/4 (1992), 497–512.

³¹Lawrie, “The Negro Worker,” 83. Elizabeth G. Meier, *A History of the New York School of Social Work* (New York, 1954).

R. A. Seligman) at Columbia, he was already lecturing at the School of Philanthropy.³² His topic was “methods of research and investigation,” which covered how to draw up survey questions; “schedules for business enterprises, wage earners, and professional classes”; and “tabulation and the making of tables.” In embarking on his own doctoral work in 1909, Haynes closely followed these plans.³³

Haynes’s dissertation, “The Negro at Work in New York City,” was a detailed survey inspired by the material he encountered while a student. It was, to use the course description for Social Economy 285 “The Standard of Living,” a study of people “living in New York City ... below or near the line of full nutrition and economic independence.”³⁴ It was also inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1899 pioneering study *The Philadelphia Negro*.³⁵ Haynes consulted Du Bois before beginning his research, and benefited from the latter’s introductions.³⁶ Both thinkers were concerned with studying the effects of the early Great Migration, in particular how new black arrivals in northern cities adapted to their changed circumstances. And both used statistics to draw their conclusions. Du Bois’s influence shone throughout Haynes’s dissertation work, nowhere more than on pages 50 and 51, on which Haynes presented block-by-block maps of Harlem, color-coded to reflect where black residents lived, just as Du Bois had done for Philadelphia’s 7th ward.

Statistics, whether about criminality, or in service of “scientific” racism, had long been wielded against black Americans—used as purported proof of racial inferiority. This is what Frederick Hoffman had done in *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*. For him, high crime rates were not the symptom of systemic injustice or racist policing, but rather of biological difference. Haynes, like Du Bois, used statistics to tell a very different story: a story about black achievement that was not premised on an assumption of biological inferiority. Statistics and facts could be liberatory. They could speak truth to power.

“Facts” presented in schedules and tables bound the academic knowledge of the Columbia classroom to the street-level social work taught at the New York School of Philanthropy. Haynes’s work was full of statistics: lists and charts reporting that there were twenty-three black men in the city street-cleaning department, 365 elevator-men, six asphalt layers, and thirty-two cigar makers. He noted that most black workers toiled in unskilled jobs (“the result of historical servitude, of a prejudice on the part of white workmen and employers”), but was encouraged by the “prophetic” increase of skilled wage earners.³⁷ There were long tables containing detailed information of the

³² Haynes, *The Negro at Work in New York City*, 7. Bulletin of Information supplementary announcement of graduate courses, 1908–1909 and 1909–1910, UA #0322, CUA. George Haynes grade book, 1910, Office of Registrar Records, UA#0084, Box 34, CUA.

³³ Bulletin of the New York School of Philanthropy, 1909–1910, 18–19, quoted in Daniel Perlman, “Stirring the White Conscience: The Life of George Edmund Haynes” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, New York, 1972), 57.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 39–41.

³⁵ Haynes, *The Negro at Work in New York City*, 8.

³⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois to Haynes, 26 Feb. 1909, Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts Amherst, at <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b002-i388>.

³⁷ Haynes, *The Negro at Work in New York City*, 74–7.

sort habitually published in German journals like the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* and in American statistical reports. Haynes undertook a “personal canvass” of black families and state census data to present a statistical picture of 7,848 Black wage earners in northern Manhattan, as well as data from employment agencies, and another data set he built from a survey of thirty-seven major New York employers.³⁸

The point of all this information? Black workers were just as good as white ones, if not better. Using data from two New York employment agencies, Haynes compiled a data set of 902 cases relating to black domestic workers. He was particularly focused on questions posed to former employers, whether workers were “capable,” “sober or temperate,” and “honest.” The responses were overwhelmingly positive. Some 95.8 percent of responses indicated that black employees were “capable,” 97.6 percent indicated they were “sober or temperate,” and 98.4 percent noted them as “honest.” Haynes did not offer comparable statistics for workers of other races, but he made that comparison using another data set built from his survey of thirty-seven New York employers. He had asked the employers to compare the speed, quality, and reliability of black and white workers. “The consensus,” he concluded, “was that the Negro workmen ... measured up to the white.” Black workers were like white workers. Indeed, they were often better; they “usually had to be well above the average to secure and hold a place in the skilled trades.”³⁹

Haynes published his dissertation in 1912. The year before, he had been appointed professor of sociology and economics at Fisk University in Nashville. At that point, he was one of the few scholars focused on the social science of the Great Migration; Du Bois’s work and his dissertation were “about the only things that have been done in this line.”⁴⁰ As the Great Migration continued, Haynes continued to investigate it. In 1917, he helped organize a special issue of the progressive magazine *The Survey* on “the exodus of Negroes from the south to the north.”⁴¹

Haynes’s status as an academic was appealing to Labor Department leaders, but there was a more powerful reason why he made an attractive choice for “director of Negro economics”: his network of professional contacts. Like most black progressives, Haynes believed in cooperation with established liberal white organizations. While at Columbia, he started working for the Committee for Improving the Industrial Conditions of Negroes, a group founded in 1906 by black educator Dr William Bulkley with donations from white philanthropists to offer vocational evening classes.⁴² Haynes’s task was to find jobs for Bulkley’s students. Armed with letters of introduction from some of the city’s most prominent reformers and donors, Haynes approached employers. In so doing, he fostered his own independent relationships with them; the employers were the source of the thirty-seven-firm data set featured in his dissertation.

Charismatic and personable, Haynes made inroads with the white philanthropists and reformers backing Bulkley, particularly Ruth Standish Baldwin and Frances A.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 42, 88.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁰ Haynes to W. L. Ricks, 21 April 1916, JWJ 101 Box 1, Folder 9, Beinecke.

⁴¹ Arthur P. Kellogg to Haynes, 6 July 1917, JWJ 101, Box 1, Folder 8, Beinecke.

⁴² Nancy J. Weiss, *The National Urban League, 1910–1940* (Oxford, 1974), Ch. 2.

Kellor. Baldwin was a donor, the wife of a railroad tycoon. Kellor was a Chicago-educated sociologist whose statistical analyses of black crime posited environmental (rather than biological) causes—a direct refutation of Hoffman’s work.⁴³ Both were impressed by Haynes and within months agreed to partner with him on a new venture. The goal was to train black social workers, of whom there were vanishingly few. For Haynes, the absence of black social workers was a wasted opportunity. “Group psychology and common sense,” he wrote, “made it obvious that teachers and exemplars of their own kind offered the most direct way of influencing the customs and habits of a people.”⁴⁴

In forming the Committee on Urban Conditions among Negroes (CUCAN) in 1910, Haynes sought to replicate his own story. Doing so required interracial cooperation. White people had “to work with Negroes for their mutual advantage and advancement rather than working for them as a problem.”⁴⁵ Cooperation was to be based on economic science. Haynes asked Edwin Seligman, his economics professor at Columbia, to be the committee’s chairman, and another of his professors, Edward T. Devine, to serve on its board. In a matter of months, Haynes’s new committee merged, both with the Committee on Urban Conditions and with a third group founded by Kellor to suppress (black) prostitution. The result was the National Urban League on Urban Conditions among Negroes, of which Haynes assumed leadership.⁴⁶

At its core was Haynes’s plan to train black social workers. Under his guidance, the National Urban League established a fellowship to fund black college students, partnered with the New York School of Philanthropy, and in 1911 launched its own training center for social workers at Fisk in Nashville. Haynes himself left New York to oversee the program and become a professor at Fisk, after Du Bois vouched that he could “do the work in economics.”⁴⁷

The early National Urban League occupied a place somewhere between the activism of Du Bois’s newly formed NAACP and Booker T. Washington’s accommodationism; its exact place in this spectrum has been debated by historians.⁴⁸ It favored “efforts of conciliation ... persuasion and cooperation”; “social order” was paramount.⁴⁹ To this end, many of the league’s leaders, including Kellor and Baldwin, sought to slow the

⁴³Frances Kellor, “The Criminal Negro: A Sociological Study,” *The Arena* 25/1 (1901), 59–68; Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*, 105–8.

⁴⁴George E. Haynes, “Conditions among Negroes in the Cities,” *Annals* 49 (Sept. 1913), 105–19, at 118. Weiss, *National Urban League*, Chs. 2, 3; Touré F. Reed, *Not Alms but Opportunity: The Urban League and the Politics of Racial Uplift, 1910–1950* (Chapel Hill, 2009), 12–13.

⁴⁵Cited in Perlman, “Stirring the White Conscience,” 73.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 74–7.

⁴⁷W. E. B. Du Bois to Haynes, 19 Jan. 1920, Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts, <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/pageturn/mums312-b002-i387/#page/1/mode/1up>.

⁴⁸Nancy Weiss argues that the Urban League leaned toward Du Bois; Jesse T. Moore argues that it cleaved to Booker T. Washington. Reed, *Not Alms but Opportunity*, 4–5. Jesse T. Moore, *A Search for Equality: The National Urban League, 1910–1961* (University Park, 1981). Weiss, *The National Urban League*.

⁴⁹George E. Haynes, *The Birth and Childhood of the National Urban League*, pamphlet, 20 April 1960, 1, quoted in Perlman, “Stirring the White Conscience,” 82; Reed, *Not Alms but Opportunity*, 62. Nina Banks, “Uplifting the Race through Domesticity,” *Feminist Economics* 12/4 (2006), 599–624.

northward migration of black southerners, a central plank of Washingtonian accommodationism (Washington himself joined the league's board in 1914). Haynes himself was less sure; one way or another, he argued, large-scale black migration was here "to stay."⁵⁰ Still, the Urban League's cautious moderation, its connections with elite white reformers, and its emphasis on social order recommended it to federal administrators.

In the biographical sketch that Department of Labor officials used to evaluate Haynes for the DNE directorship, the sections about the Urban League were marked with "N.B."⁵¹ The development of the Urban League, the document noted, was "a testimony to the success he had in finding other capable Negro workers and in cooperation with noble white and colored citizens."⁵² Haynes was a consensus candidate. He had the support of the NAACP, the Urban League, the Russell Sage Foundation, and the National Conference of Charities, whose president called Haynes "a man who commands respect from all the races."⁵³ The black press, including W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Crisis*, greeted Haynes's appointment with cautious hope; he was, according to the *Chicago Defender*, "unusually qualified."⁵⁴

* * *

The Department of Labor was more racially progressive than other parts of the US state.⁵⁵ Still, against the backdrop of the resegregation of the federal government, its creation of an all-black division was provocative. The appointment of the moderate Haynes helped smooth things over. The state used Haynes. But Haynes also used the power of the state; he was the state. At the Department of Labor, he began to create a shadow Urban League, to re-create the networks he had helped develop over the past decade. As "special adviser," he bore a letter from the assistant secretary of labor requesting cooperation and "complete and trustworthy information."⁵⁶ Though Haynes and Post publicly denied that the division's purpose was to facilitate racial assimilation, both harbored this goal. Haynes was also eager to use his post to debunk the persistent myths about the inferiority of black labor, as he had in his dissertation.

Publicly, the Department of Labor committed to black workers. One report claimed it would spend \$624,679 in the 1918 fiscal year on "work directly or manifestly affecting Negroes," referencing a massive staff of over two hundred employees.⁵⁷ But such figures were highly misleading. They did not refer to employees or funds specifically devoted to black labor, but rather to work done on behalf of labor in general. Haynes himself only oversaw a staff of about twenty, many loaned from other departments.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Haynes, *The Negro at Work in New York City*, 123, 148.

⁵¹ Sketch of George Edmund Haynes, n.d., 174.3.5, 8/102-A, NARA.

⁵² Reed, *Not Alms but Opportunity*, 16–17; Weiss, *National Urban League*, Ch. 3.

⁵³ Guzda, "Social Experiment," 18. J. H. Dillard to Louis Post, 13 March 1918, 174.3.5, 8/102-B, NARA.

⁵⁴ "Editorial," *The Crisis* 16/2 (1918), 61. "Dr. George E. Haynes Appointed Adviser to Department of Labor," *Chicago Defender*, 4 May 1918, 1.

⁵⁵ Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service*.

⁵⁶ Louis F. Post to Haynes, 8 Aug. 1919, DNE, RG 174.4.7, Haynes–Post Correspondence, NARA.

⁵⁷ Estimated expenses, n.d. [1918], 8/102-A, NARA 174. Cf. Guzda, "Social Experiment," 20.

⁵⁸ See correspondence between Louis F. Post and J. B. Densmore, 25 July 1918 and 6 Aug. 1918; Employment Service File 1020-139, n.d. [1918], 174.3.5, 8/102-A, NARA; Haynes, memorandum, 8 March 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-A, NARA.

After a year of work, he projected expenses of just \$20,872 (only a fraction of which was ultimately received).⁵⁹ Still, Haynes oversaw an entirely black staff in the regressive Wilson administration. And even if the division lacked executive power, it represented a space within the state for black economic thinkers to develop their ideas: a space of discursive possibility. Though the department was motivated by crass pragmatism, it bore some unexpected side effects, particularly for the history of black economic thinking.⁶⁰

The initial activity of the department involved more social work than theoretical economics. Haynes's small staff consisted mostly of DNE "supervisors," each responsible for a state. Working out of US Employment Services offices from Durham to Detroit, supervisors were to liaise with volunteers, to foster good relations with community groups and politicians, and to wheedle and strong-arm recalcitrant employers. They were, in short, to grease the wheels of interracial cooperation, all the while recording and reporting data on black workers. These agents of "Negro economics" were, like Haynes, to be jointly social scientists and social workers. Without executive power, they were to study the situation, make personal connections, cajole, and invoke their position as federal agents.

To recruit supervisors, Haynes drew from the state and organizations like the National Urban League. After hiring the two Census employees who had reported on the Great Migration, Charles E. Hall (Ohio) and Dr William Jennifer (Michigan), Haynes sought out men with experiences similar to his own. William M. Ashby (New Jersey), a graduate of Lincoln and Yale Universities, had served as Newark Urban League's executive secretary. T. C. Erwin (Virginia) was a Fisk alumnus who had worked as a field agent for the Negro Organization Society before becoming its executive secretary. Lemuel Foster (Mississippi) was also a Fisk graduate, who had "done considerable welfare and social work in the South." Jesse O. Thomas (New York) had been the field secretary for the Tuskegee Institute and would join the Urban League as southern field organizer soon after. Forrester B. Washington (Illinois) studied at the New York School of Philanthropy and received a master's degree in social economy at Columbia in 1917, having won the Urban League Fellowship. Washington worked as executive secretary for the Detroit Urban League and would later lead the Atlanta University School of Social Work.⁶¹

In the people he hired, Haynes sought out the "spirit of conciliation and cooperation." The "work of mediation between white workers, white employers, and Negro workers," he noted, "called for exceptional qualities of mind and character in addition to technical knowledge and efficiency." Officers of the Division of Negro Economics needed "self-control" and "patience" "far above the average." After all,

⁵⁹ George E. Haynes, memorandum, 10 March 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-A, NARA.

⁶⁰ Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service*, 178.

⁶¹ Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction: Statistics, Problems, and Policies Relating to the Greater Inclusion of Negro Wage Earners in American Industry and Agriculture* (Washington, DC, 1920), 86–8. Haynes, memorandum, 10 March 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-A, NARA. "Temple Cutler Erwin," in Arthur Bunyan Caldwell, ed., *History of the American Negro and His Institutions: Virginia Edition* (Atlanta, 1921), 27–9. "The Horizon," *The Crisis* 5/18 (1919), 254. Barrow, "The Social Welfare Career and Contributions of Forrester Blanchard Washington."

there was “serious doubt ... about the expert efficiency of Negroes in official positions.”⁶² Supervisors had hard jobs, but they were reasonably paid—between \$1,500 and \$1,740 per year. When Charles Hall, who had worked eighteen years for the Census, transferred to the DNE, he got a \$300 raise.⁶³ Still, by government standards, the DNE operated on a shoestring budget. When Hall left DC to take up his position in Ohio, he was issued with three indelible pencils, three memorandum pads, and one briefcase.⁶⁴

Haynes himself was an intermediary, an embodiment of the spirit of dialogue that he championed. Besides writing a blizzard of letters, making connections, and helping place workers, he traveled around the country to “strategic centers ... where Negro workers’ problems were of pressing importance.”⁶⁵ Haynes prioritized face-to-face interactions. He was a man on the go, racking up thousands of miles on the train through the Jim Crow South as he followed the arteries of the Great Migration, backwards and forwards. Most of the surviving correspondence between Haynes and his assistant, Karl Phillips, concerns the logistics of managing a government office from the road. Phillips, a Cornell-educated lawyer, was constantly forwarding mail to addresses along Haynes’s circuitous path. In October 1919, for instance, Haynes was in Washington for the first week, New York for four days, then back to Washington, followed by a day in Columbus, Detroit, Toledo, Pittsburgh, Meadville, Pittsburgh, two days in Cincinnati, a day in Louisville, and two in Atlanta.⁶⁶ Haynes appeared at meetings with elected officials, large conferences and gatherings, at which “there were usually white and colored speakers before the audience on the same platform.” Cooperation and “conciliation” were his watchwords.⁶⁷

For Haynes, the DNE was a continuation of his work studying the Great Migration from both academic and practical perspectives. As he put it, “the problem alike of statesman, race leader, and philanthropist is to understand the conditions of segregation and oppositions due to race prejudices that are arising as a sequent to this urban concentration.”⁶⁸ This was Haynes’s task: to serve the statesman, race leader, and philanthropist. Doing so involved his signature blend of social work and social science.

* * *

Haynes’s first coup came in June 1918, when he convened a meeting of state officials and “the most substantial Negroes” in the North Carolina governor’s office. As Chad Williams describes others doing, Haynes adopted a rhetoric of wartime patriotism to urge interracial cooperation. Americans, black and white, were fighting together for American democratic ideals; the first two Americans to receive the French Croix de

⁶²Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 12, 19–20.

⁶³Haynes to Louis Post, 1 June 1918, 174.3.5, 8/102-A, NARA.

⁶⁴Haynes to chief clerk, 26 June 1918, 174.3.5, 8/102-A, NARA.

⁶⁵Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 12.

⁶⁶Tentative Schedule, Oct. 1919, DNE, RG 174.4.7, [Correspondence] H, NARA.

⁶⁷Haynes, report, 20 May 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-C, NARA. Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 65.

⁶⁸Haynes, *The Negro at Work in New York City*, 33.

guerre were black.⁶⁹ Inspired, North Carolina's governor, T. W. Bickett, authorized a "State Negro Workers' Advisory Committee" to oversee a host of local and county subcommittees. The North Carolina committee became a model for other committees, which developed in ten other states. The committee, composed of volunteers, was the organizing unit of the Division of Negro Economics. Convening regularly, it provided a forum for employers, unionists, and community leaders to talk: to head off violence and propose moderate remedies to social tensions that could be legitimated by the department's imprimatur.

Less than a month after the North Carolina meeting, Haynes was in Gulfport, Mississippi addressing an interracial (though segregated) crowd of several hundred at the Southern Sociological Congress. The meeting spawned a Mississippi "organization similar to the one adopted by North Carolina." A similar Florida advisory committee launched days later, following a "monster mass meeting" in Jacksonville at which Haynes and the white supremacist governor Sidney Catts both spoke. Other conferences followed: in Ohio, Kentucky, Georgia. County and municipal committees sprang up too; in Virginia alone, there were sixty-five such groups; in North Carolina, nearly thirty; in Florida, twenty-six.⁷⁰

Political enthusiasm for such "Negro Workers' Advisory Committees" ran high in southern states, where the black exodus had left employers facing labor shortages. As a Tennessee executive wrote to Haynes, "our business men and plants realize the harm done them by Negro migration and will welcome any well considered movement backed by the Government to so modify conditions as to make the Negro better satisfied."⁷¹ Southern employers were confronting a dramatic new reality.⁷² That reality drove illegal compulsory work laws and desperate, violent attempts to prevent black departure, including blocking northbound trains.⁷³ It also motivated the formation of the Division of Negro Economics and the statewide committees, in which modest improvements in working conditions could be discussed. As a DNE report from Mississippi put it, "it is apparent that these results were made possible through the new consciousness of the Negro wage earner as to his worth as a producing agent."⁷⁴ The impersonal language of economics here was meant not so much to dehumanize as to standardize: to sidestep other racial comparisons.

* * *

Haynes and his team understood the Great Migration in economic terms and they strategically deployed such terms. "Shortage of labor in northern industries was the

⁶⁹Cited in Guzda, "Social Experiment," 21. Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill, 2010).

⁷⁰Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 14; 64.

⁷¹Bolton Smith to Haynes, 16 Sept. 1918, 174.3.5, 8/102-E, NARA.

⁷²P. Shillady to Haynes, 17 Sept. 1918, 174.3.5, 8/102-E, NARA.

⁷³Anonymous to Secretary of War, 23 Sept. 1918, 174.3.5, 8/102-E, NARA. Brian Kelly, "White Resistance to the Great Migration" in Steven A. Reich, ed., *The Great Black Migration: A Historical Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic*, ebook (2014), 148–53; James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, 1989), Ch. 4.

⁷⁴Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 83.

direct cause of the increased Negro migration,” Haynes wrote. In a Mississippi sawmill, wages were barely \$1.10 per day. Agricultural laborers could expect less, perhaps sixty or seventy-five cents for a day’s work. Sharecroppers often ended up with even less than that. Unskilled iron- and steelworkers could expect \$2.50 to \$3.00 for a ten-hour work-day in Alabama, but \$3.50 to \$4.00 in Ohio and \$3.00 to \$4.95 in New York.⁷⁵ Statistics about wages were so central because wages themselves were transformative for many participants in the Great Migration. Sharecropping did not involve a cash wage, but rather a yearly cycle of debt. Wages carried with them a degree of financial freedom. As historian James Grossman put it, “the material basis of the black community vitality ... was the cash wage.”⁷⁶

Yet framing the Great Migration in terms of “Negro economics,” particularly through wages and labor productivity, also permitted a great deal to remain unsaid. Occasionally, the violence faced by black southerners made it into the updates on the division’s state-level work, but only in passing, as when one noted that “a campaign to recruit the boys for sawmills in Mississippi has been chilled by recent Mississippi lynchings.”⁷⁷ The language of economics also sidestepped some of the racist tropes used to explain the movement. Judge Gilbert Stephenson of Winston-Salem attributed the migration to black criminality; an Interior Department official, Lathrop Brown, suggested that it was due to a desire to procure alcohol.⁷⁸

For the most part, silence on pervasive violence was the norm. This silence and the accompanying pro-business rhetoric meant that horrific abuse was overlooked or buried, for which Haynes came under sharp criticism from the black left. A black American, however wealthy, the leftist *Messenger* magazine noted, could still be “lynched in *his own country*.”⁷⁹ Yet for the cooperative social-working Haynes, strategic silence bought greater cooperation to address on-the-ground economic problems. And, in 1918, he could point to results. In North Carolina, Dr A. E. Moore, the DNE supervisor, helped create economic incentives for black workers to stay in the state’s agricultural processing facilities. A cotton oil company, for instance, underwrote a \$500 life insurance policy for workers who stayed on the job for half a year. Turnover rates fell dramatically: in some industries by 57 percent. In Truxton, Virginia, DNE supervisor T. C. Erwin worked with the US Housing Bureau to construct 254 homes, complete with electricity, hot water, and modern appliances for nearby federal black employees. In Florida, DNE supervisor A. W. Armwood helped place “thousands of Negro workers.”⁸⁰

In the wartime North, white employers welcomed and recruited black labor. As Ohio governor James Cox told a DNE conference, “we need your people and need them

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 10, 33, 82.

⁷⁶ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 261.

⁷⁷ George E. Haynes, report, 13 June 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-C, NARA.

⁷⁸ Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 14.

⁷⁹ “George Haynes,” *The Messenger*, May–June 1919, 12–13, original emphasis; “George E. Haynes Compromises the Case of the Negro Again,” *The Messenger*, July 1919, 7.

⁸⁰ Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 66. Guzda, “Social Experiment,” 22.

badly.”⁸¹ Black community groups eagerly provided workers. John Huggs, president of the Colored Men’s Civic Association of Paterson, New Jersey, told Haynes that local factories were “beginning to wake up to the fact that ... skilled and unskilled negro Labor are splendid workers, when given a chance.” “It has been a hard fight,” Huggs wrote, “but ... we are gradually winning.”⁸²

Finding and improving jobs was the division’s bread and butter in its first year, but there remained a deeper concern that the arrivals would not properly “adjust.” “Adjustment” had long been a worry of northern black intellectuals, many of whom feared that the arrival of rural southerners would disrupt their own social status. Adjustment was at the center of Haynes’s doctoral work, and some version of the term “adjust” or “adjustment” appeared forty-four times in the DNE’s final report, its one and only publication.⁸³ The most immediate and cataclysmic risk of “adjustment” going badly was the race riot, like those that erupted in Washington and Chicago shortly after the war.

But cultural “maladjustment” was itself rooted in labor (i.e. economic) problems. The causes of race riots, according to Haynes, were “largely the results of the labor and other economic conditions,” just like those of the Great Migration itself.⁸⁴ It was not coincidental that much of the 1919 riot in Chicago (sparked by the murder of a black teenager who came too close to a white beach) took place in the city’s stockyards. As economic problems, Haynes hypothesized, they had economic solutions that could be provided by a Division of Negro Economics. Interracial committees were a way of smoothing out racial friction arising from labor disputes. Despite the violence in Chicago, the DNE claimed that “acute racial situations were met and adjusted” through the “cordial effort of advisory committees and local organizations.”⁸⁵

In northern cities, DNE agents and committees worked with private social organizations to help black arrivals “adjust” to urban life. Doing so mainly meant finding them jobs. In Pittsburgh, the DNE local committee secured employment for hundreds of black workers at the Carnegie Steel Company. In New Jersey, DNE supervisor William M. Ashby placed thousands of black employees in munitions factories, including 385 black women in jobs loading shells.⁸⁶ New York supervisor Jesse Thomas convinced the Gimbels department store to hire black workers. In Chicago, Forrester B. Washington placed thousands of returning Negro soldiers in civilian jobs, personally calling over a thousand firms to solicit openings, even as Chicago employers laid off black workers to accommodate returning white soldiers.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 107; Charles E. Hall to Haynes, 21 Nov. 1918, 174.3.5, 8/102-C, NARA.

⁸² John A. Huggs to Haynes, 10 Sept. 1919, DNE, 174.4.7, [Correspondence] H, NARA.

⁸³ Reed, *Not Alms but Opportunity*, Ch. 4. Paul Raymond Din Lawrie, “‘To Make the Negro Anew’: The African American Worker in the Progressive Imagination, 1896–1928” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, Toronto, 2011). Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, Ch. 3.

⁸⁴ Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 26.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸⁶ George E. Haynes, report, 1 July 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-C, NARA. Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 90, 117–18.

⁸⁷ George E. Haynes, reports, 25 March 1919, 13 June 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-C, NARA; Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 73–6.

Washington also arranged for Butcher Workmen's Local 651 (which had organized black meatpackers) and a cooperative society to found cooperative stores in several black neighborhoods and provide information to new black-owned businesses on banking and bookkeeping. This was one of the rare instances when the DNE engaged directly with a union. At the Urban League, Haynes had encouraged black union participation, but at the DNE he dealt much more with employers. Not only did Haynes perceive Samuel Gompers's AF of L to be pervasively racist, but also he was wary of the political implications of allying with unions. Against rising fear of communist or other radical agitation, Haynes kept organized labor at arm's length. "Negro labor," he assured Secretary Wilson, "is not being urged to unionize by anyone exercising any authority of this Department."⁸⁸

Hope and scientific argument

In short, understanding the Great Migration through the lens of "Negro economics" meant treating it as an economic phenomenon about labor. Doing so did not mean avoiding racism, but rather confronting it in a particular domain. Helen B. Irvin, special agent of the Women's Bureau attached to the DNE, reported how a cigar maker hired black women, but only "pretty types" with light skin, who could be "regarded by patrons as Cuban, South American, or Spanish." The supervisor for Alabama described to Haynes how Mobile employers exploited their black workers almost to the point of slavery.⁸⁹

That said, there were reasons to focus on improving the *economic* lot of black workers. First, during the labor shortages of World War I, there was real hope. "The hands of economic prosperity," Haynes wrote, "are stretched out to us and we may grasp them firmly for the future." There was opportunity to climb the economic ladder, but doing so required effort. "The Negro worker must see to it that his job is done just as well and a 'wee bit' better than the other fellow's," Haynes wrote. He must consider his health and "look out for training to do his job better." He had "to look to his food, to his recreation, to his fresh air, and to his sleeping and living conditions." Quality of life was a means to an economic end. "Physical vitality is one of the elements of survival in the economic competition." To win the economic competition, black workers had to "save, combine, and invest." Only then could they build enough capital to "get our place in the great world of agriculture, commerce, and industry as owners and directors and superintendents."⁹⁰ The stakes were high. "Every time a Negro falls down on the job," Haynes wrote, "he pulls down his country and the entire race."⁹¹

There was a second reason for framing the "Negro question" in terms of economics: by doing so, questions of equity and race could be discussed in scientific language, as

⁸⁸George Haynes, Questions and Answers about the DNE, 1920, DNE, 174.4.7, Matters of Record, f. 37. Reed, *Not Alms but Opportunity*, Ch. 4; Wilson, *Segregated Scholars*, 133–5.

⁸⁹Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 127.

⁹⁰George E. Haynes, "Grasping the Hands of Economic Opportunity," 25 June 1920, DNE, 174.4.7, correspondence with William Jennifer, NARA; George E. Haynes, "The Opportunity of Negro Labor," *The Crisis* 5/18 (1919), 236–8.

⁹¹Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 138.

Du Bois and others were already doing. And economics, unlike sociology, with all its preoccupations with cultural difference, was already coalescing around the idea that economic rationality—economic *thinking*—was a universal human trait. Economists might be racial bigots, but they were also “racial liberals” who increasingly purported that economic behavior was consistent across humanity.⁹²

Rendering black Americans as economic actors allowed Haynes and others to leverage such language and ideas. It became a strategy for fighting an uphill battle against entrenched prejudice, not just for recognition of black equality, but also for the DNE’s importance. Haynes and his division faced a tide of bigotry. Shortly after the armistice, the head of the National Lumber Manufacturers announced that he would be happy to discuss labor issues with Wilson or Post, “but when it comes to sitting in council with Dr. Haynes, a negro, you will have to excuse me. In the South we tell negroes what to do; we do not take counsel with them.”⁹³ One of the ugliest episodes came in 1919 when Haynes and Florida supervisor A. W. Armwood refused to block the leftist International Workers of the World (IWW) from organizing black workers. Sensing a political opportunity, Florida governor Sidney Catts tried to eject the DNE from his state, asserting that its representatives were “carpetbag, negro federal officers” promoting racial amalgamation. “I am looking upon this question from the standpoint of a white man,” he wrote to Secretary Wilson, “and being a Southern-born man I could look upon it from no other viewpoint, for this race will always dominate and control the South.”⁹⁴

Against this background, Haynes sought to make his division’s voice heard. This was vital, not only to make its work matter, but also to attend to immediate material concerns. Mere months after his appointment, Haynes was preparing for “whatever emergencies might arise” if Congress did not renew the DNE’s funding.⁹⁵ The fears were well grounded. In 1919, Congress significantly cut the division’s budget. As white soldiers returned from Europe, black labor suddenly ceased to be a priority. Though with Post’s support, Haynes began drafting legislation to permanently enshrine the division within the Department of Labor, he still had to lay off almost the entirety of the organization he had built. Haynes continued with a skeleton staff—just his assistant Karl Phillips and a stenographer—and funds appropriated from other Department of Labor divisions. He himself took a massive pay cut, technically working for the government a third of the time on a per diem of \$9.50, and for the Interchurch Movement the remaining two-thirds.⁹⁶

The cuts could not have come at a worse time. As demobilized soldiers returned home, black workers were pushed out of jobs acquired during the war. As Illinois supervisor Forest B. Washington reported to the NAACP’s organ *The Crisis* in 1919, “99 per cent” of returning Negro soldiers were unable to find jobs; “the conduct

⁹²Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*.

⁹³*New Orleans Vindicator*, 12 April 1919, in 174.3.5, 8/102-E, NARA.

⁹⁴Sidney Catts to Wilson, 22 April 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-E, NARA; “Antagonisms Met With,” 28 April 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-C, NARA.

⁹⁵George E. Haynes, report, 20 July 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-C, NARA.

⁹⁶Royal Meeker to Haynes, 27 June 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-A, NARA. Haynes, report, 1 Aug. 1919, 174.3.5, 8, 8/102-C, NARA.

of Chicago employers at the present time does not justify the faith in the gratitude of the American people held by Negro soldiers when they went 'over the top!'"⁹⁷ After race riots in Chicago and Washington, Haynes told the Secretary of Labor that widespread racial tension was "a matter of national concern calling for some attention from the National Government."⁹⁸ Without funds, Haynes predicted that it would be "exceedingly difficult" to continue the "far-reaching work of conciliation."⁹⁹

All the while, letters kept arriving, asking for help. The condition in South Bend, Indiana was "very critical," one man wrote. "We haven't nothing to eat—some that Studebaker has brought here for the benefit of his work and now they won't give a colored man a job. We go everywhere and ask for work. They tell us they aint [*sic*] hiring no colored men or they say they just want white men." Haynes's response revealed a deep distress: the department had been "so limited in provision," there was "so much employment in other places ... that we could hardly advise you where to go."¹⁰⁰

* * *

Without funds to do social work, Haynes announced that the DNE's "chief function" would shift, to present statistics about "Negro labor situations" so "that a careful comparison may be made between Negro workers and other workers."¹⁰¹ The result would be the division's only publication, a report titled *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*.¹⁰² The report was the most comprehensive statistical overview of the Great Migration to date. Haynes noted in its introduction that the DNE would have produced even more tables and graphs, "if not for the lack of funds and clerical help." Even so, the so-called bulletin ran to 144 pages, presenting data on 62,316 black men working at 277 firms in twenty-six states. It compiled detailed information on earnings and worktimes, along with reports from thirty-eight large firms.¹⁰³ Table upon table compared the number of hours that black and white workers were employed, their wages, and their skill levels for a host of different occupations. There were door cleaners at foundries, "pencilmen," "sulphate laborers," hookers, pushers, pickers, piercers.¹⁰⁴

Statistics collated knowledge and knowledge was power. For the empiricists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, statistics provided a way of examining society, as German economist Wilhelm Roscher put it, "from all sides."¹⁰⁵ So obsessed with statistics did the historicists become that the process of statistical collection (without analysis) became an end in and of itself. As German-influenced economists, Haynes and Phillips were obsessed too. Haynes had trained at Columbia, where mentors including E. R. A Seligman were putting the university "as far in the lead in practical

⁹⁷"Industry," *The Crisis* 5/17 (1919), 242.

⁹⁸Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 135.

⁹⁹Haynes to W. B. Wilson, 7 July 1919, 174.3.5, NARA.

¹⁰⁰Letter from M.L.J., 2 Feb. 1921, and Haynes to M.L.J., 21 Feb. 1921, 174.3.5, 8/102-F, NARA.

¹⁰¹Haynes, report, 1 Nov. 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-C, NARA.

¹⁰²Haynes, draft survey questions, 14 July 1920, DNE, 174.4.7, Haynes-Post Correspondence, NARA.

¹⁰³Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 6–8.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 46–8.

¹⁰⁵Wilhelm Roscher, *Grundlagen der Nationalökonomie* (1857) (Stuttgart, 1880), 32.

statistics, as she is already in the lead in economics and sociology.”¹⁰⁶ He followed in the path of the German-educated Du Bois, who brought the German data-driven approach back to the United States and built a network that reads as a who’s who of black social scientists. In *The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia* and *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois deployed reams of statistics to investigate black life and labor.

Haynes did the same. But importantly, Haynes worked in a time before time series. As Thomas Stapleford has noted, in the early twentieth century “most reform-oriented studies repeated nineteenth-century patterns, with an emphasis on local, democratically oriented investigations that were rarely repeated.” Labor statistics were purpose-driven, meant to explain a social ill, particularly the “labor question.”¹⁰⁷ The social survey was common currency in the early twentieth century. The Russell Sage Foundation, which sponsored many such investigations (including Haynes’s dissertation), counted 2,775 surveys conducted between 1907 and 1928 “made as a basis for social action.”¹⁰⁸ In this way, the surveys and data work done by the Division of Negro Economics belonged to a reformist tradition as well as a scientific one.

Statistics were important because they could make this case in terms that white policymakers could digest, particularly vital at a moment when the DNE’s funding might be further cut. They were scientific, purportedly impartial, and hard to ignore. And so Haynes and Phillips fought to publish statistics. They had to fight for the bulletin every step of the way, including long negotiations with the Government Printing Office. Still, Phillips declared himself “willing to ‘go to it’ and to give the last ounce of blood to this Negro cause.”

It is going to be a physical and mental task to assume the roles of text writer, compiler, statistician, calculating machine operator, tabulator, and typewriter. Of course Miss Campbell [a secretary] is going to become a partner in all of these roles, but I know you can see a semi-disheartening vision in realizing that we two will have to do the entire job.¹⁰⁹

Phillips’s dedication was shared. Over less than two years, Helen B. Irvin, the Women’s Bureau agent, alone visited 170 different plants in six states employing 21,808 black women.¹¹⁰

Just as in Haynes’s dissertation, statistics were everywhere in the DNE’s final report. In the bulletin, there were tables tracking black and white employment in Chicago meatpacking facilities and in US shipyards. Both showed rising black numbers until demobilization. There were also tables presenting state-level average wage data for

¹⁰⁶Quoted in Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 36. Joseph Dorfman, “The Department of Economics,” in R. Gordon Hoxie *et al.*, eds., *A History of the Faculty of Political Science, Columbia University* (New York, 1955), 161–206. A. W. Coats, “The First Two Decades of the American Economic Association,” *American Economic Review* 50/4 (1960), 556–74.

¹⁰⁷Thomas Stapleford, *The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880–2000* (Cambridge, 2009), 59–60.

¹⁰⁸Allen Eaton and Shelby M. Harrison, *A Bibliography of Social Surveys* (New York, 1930), quoted in Stapleford, *The Cost of Living in America*, 66.

¹⁰⁹Phillips to Haynes, 5 Jan. 1919, DNE, 174.4.7, Haynes–Phillips Correspondence, NARA.

¹¹⁰Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 125.

war industries that employed both black and white workers, though wages were not differentiated by race.

For the most part, Haynes presented data sets and summaries without analysis. Nevertheless two key findings emerged from the mountains of data presented in the DNE's major report, *The Negro at Work during the World War*. First, black workers constituted a hugely important part of the American labor force. There was page after page of tables that listed industries by state in which "25 or more Negroes" were employed in "war work." Using nationwide data, Haynes reported that in more industries than not, black workers worked longer hours than their white counterparts, often for less pay.¹¹¹ Haynes and Phillips noted the nearly 25,000 black workers employed by government-run shipyards and the significant increase of black labor at factories over 1918 and 1919. Using tables and graphs like Figure 1, they showed a "nearly fivefold" increase of black employees at meatpacking facilities, steel plants, and shipyards.¹¹²

Second, and even more importantly, Haynes stressed that when black arrivals were given a chance, they made excellent workers and economic agents. Like in Haynes's dissertation, the DNE's report highlighted testimonials from employers that attested to the fact that "Negro employees are as efficient as the whites." Helen Irvin noted that "several employers expressed a market preference for Negro stock girls, for reason that a greater variety of service might be demanded of them."¹¹³ Two full pages in the bulletin were devoted to describing "record-breaking negro workers," including Edward Burwell, "whose Negro crew of 11 men broke the world's record in driving piles on shipway No. 46" in Philadelphia. In his dissertation, Haynes largely left out "flesh-and-blood" anecdotes that embodied the statistics he presented. But in the bulletin of the Division of Negro Economics, meant to elicit political action, such stories—set pieces of progressive social-reform pamphlets—reappeared. Haynes wanted to make a point: that black workers were valuable to the nation and the equals of their white counterparts. The problem was that they were not treated as such.

Years later, in the 1990s, economist James B. Stewart conducted an econometric analysis of the wage data presented in the DNE's final report. Stewart determined that black workers "faced more inequities in skilled occupations," for which the labor pool was smaller. They also faced greater discrimination in finding work in "unskilled" occupations that employed relatively few people. Yet when Stewart controlled for skill level, particularly discriminatory industries, and workforce size and composition, he found that "Black workers earned wages virtually identical to those earned by white workers." Stewart's conclusion was that "conditions of strong labor demand" were "likely to facilitate more equitable wage offers for Black workers." When the labor pool was big and competitive, black workers were often able to garner wages similar to those of their

¹¹¹"Negro workers shows a higher average number of hours than white workers in nearly one-half of the total number of units of comparison, a lower average number of hours worked per week in a little less than one third of the total number, and the same average number of hours ... in about one fourth of the total number of units." Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 44.

¹¹²Ibid., 56, 58.

¹¹³Ibid., 117, 62–3.

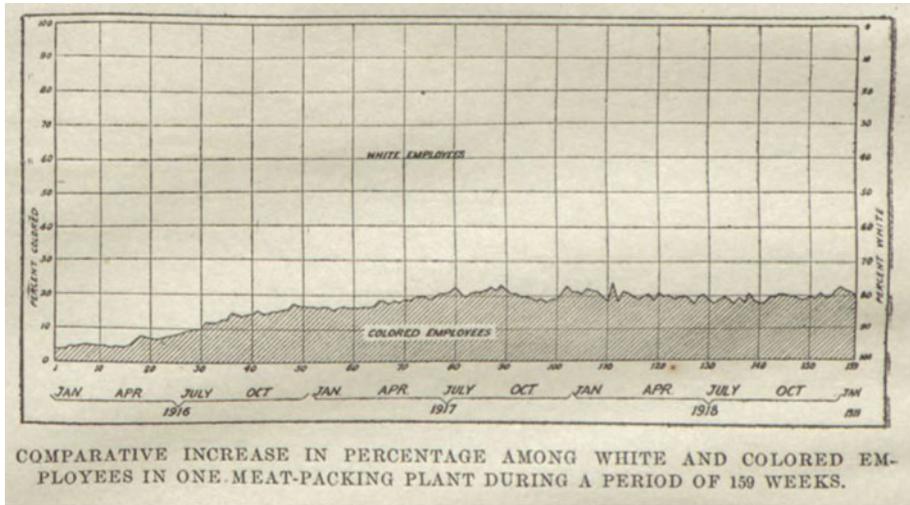


Figure 1. Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction: Statistics, Problems, and Policies Relating to the Greater Inclusion of Negro Wage Earners in American Industry and Agriculture* (Washington, DC, 1920), p. 58.

white counterparts. This finding was consistent with Haynes's views about the quality of black labor: in a competitive marketplace, it proved its worth.¹¹⁴

Haynes himself did not have access to econometric tools. But his own methods led him to the same conclusion. In a survey circulated among white employers, Haynes asked them to compare white and black employees in terms of the quality and quantity of their work. Another question asked employers to compare "accident record, tardiness, days lost, loyalty, morale."¹¹⁵ Haynes insisted on these queries, even after his boss Louis Post objected to explicitly comparative questions.¹¹⁶ The responses were striking. Not one of the thirty-eight employers (collectively with 108,315 employees) found any difference between "the loss of materials due to defective workmanship between white and Negro employees." Only six of the employers reported any difference between "the conduct and behavior" of black and white workers, and only two reported black employees as taking longer to train.¹¹⁷ Haynes used these data to argue that any racial differences in work were not biological but cultural, and could be solved by "adjustment." Just as black new arrivals needed adjustment, so too did white "less advanced races of present immigration."¹¹⁸ This echoed a similar conclusion from his Columbia dissertation. The problems of black "maladjustment to the new urban environment are

¹¹⁴Stewart, "George Edmund Haynes and the Office of Negro Economics," 224–6.

¹¹⁵Haynes draft survey questions.

¹¹⁶Louis F. Post to Haynes, 12 Aug. 1919, DNE, 174.4.7, Haynes–Post Correspondence, NARA; revised questionnaire, 27 Aug. 1919, DNE, 174.4.7, Haynes–Post Correspondence, NARA.

¹¹⁷Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 50–1.

¹¹⁸Haynes, draft survey questions.

solvable by methods similar to those that help other elements of the population.” “His health, intelligence and morals respond to treatment similar to that of other denizens of the city, if only impartial treatment can be secured.”¹¹⁹

As Khalil Gibran Muhammad has written, the failure to secure that impartial treatment—the insistence on distinguishing between “foreign-born” and “Negro”—was fundamental to the condemnation of blackness.¹²⁰ Statistics, as deployed by racist social scientists like Hoffman and Commons, had been at the very center of “scientific” attacks on black Americans as biologically inferior. Haynes and his team sought to fight back with the same tools. They sought to deploy economic statistics not to condemn, but to valorize, blackness on scientific, economic terms. Statistics served a social purpose. As Haynes wrote, “facts and figures ... are only bases of information upon which to build programs and plans of action.” Part of Haynes’s program was to convince white employers to hire black workers—to furnish “reliable information to those interested in the employment of Negroes” that normalized the practice.¹²¹ Establishing the scale of black employment and the quality of black work was vital to that end.

Contexts and afterlives

In 1920, Haynes’s effort to secure \$110,000 (about \$2 million today) in appropriations for his division failed.¹²² Despite the lobbying of civil rights groups, Haynes’s old mentors, and Haynes’s own testimony, the Senate Appropriations Committee cut all funding for the Division of Negro Economics. “You are,” committee chairman Francis Warren told Haynes, referring to black Americans, “exactly equal under the law ... But as far as we are concerned, there should not be a division between different classes of workmen.” Haynes pointed out that “heretofore the inequality has rested the other way when it comes to matters of industrial opportunity and employment,” but the Senators were unmoved.¹²³ As Eric Yellin has noted, Woodrow Wilson’s assault on black federal employees and their foothold in Washington was normalized and smoothed over by successive Republican administrations.¹²⁴

And so, in 1921, Haynes left federal employment. The next year, he joined the Federal Council of Churches of Christ (FCC), an interdenominational Protestant coalition, to lead their Commission on Race Relations. Armed with a sizeable budget, Haynes continued his efforts to increase dialog and ease “adjustment” for decades.¹²⁵ Other DNE staffers stayed in government. Karl Phillips remained at the Department

¹¹⁹Haynes, *The Negro at Work in New York City*, 14, 144.

¹²⁰Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*, 6–7.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 56–8.

¹²²Karl Phillips, “Division of Negro Economics,” 12 May 1920, 174.3.5, 8/102-F, NARA.

¹²³Senate Subcommittee on Appropriations, *Hearings on H.R. 15,543, Appropriations: Civil Sundry Bill*, 65th C, 2S (28 Jan.–2 Feb. 1921), 98–100. Haynes to Samuel McCune Lindsay, 29 March 1921; Lindsay to Philander Knox, 12 March 1921; Lindsay to James Wadsworth, 23 Nov. 1921, Lindsay Papers, Box 9, CUA.

¹²⁴Yellin, *Racism in the Nation’s Service*, Ch. 7.

¹²⁵George E. Haynes, *The Work of the Commission on Race Relations, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America*, 1932, p. x5, JWJ 101 Box 4, Folder 22, Beinecke.

of Labor, where he authored a yearly report on migration.¹²⁶ Charles E. Hall returned to the Department of Commerce, where he worked on the Census and became the first African American to have supervisory authority in the department. Forrester Washington became a leader of the Atlanta School of Social Work and eventually part of the Roosevelt administration's "black cabinet."¹²⁷

Haynes and his colleagues at the Division of Negro Economics were influential and elite figures in black America. They were not radicals, but rather government bureaucrats. Haynes sought an alternative to "radical and revolutionary propaganda" spreading among black communities. He regretted Marcus Garvey's "belligerent attitude." He was alarmed by IWW materials that were "out-and-out alien Bolshiviki."¹²⁸ For Haynes, black America was on the precipice: "Their discontent growing out of previous conditions and present maladjustment in their new surroundings, their desire for American rights, their resentment against unjust discriminations and other un-American practices against them make them a very ripe field for critical development of unrest." That was why the DNE and the FCC's Commission on Race Relations were important. There was a "lack of responsible authoritative guidance for Negro wage-earners" due to an "absence of Negro persons of intelligence and character who have authoritative and effective connections with white employers and white citizens generally."¹²⁹ "Negro economics" was an attempt to solve not just the "labor problem," but also the "Negro problem." It would do so from above. As Haynes reported, "Negroes are looking to the Federal Government to take some constructive steps for their benefit."¹³⁰

For Haynes and his team, those constructive steps related to *economic* rather than legal or social benefits. But they were hardly materialists. They never made the claim, as a younger generation of "Young Turk" black intellectuals would in the 1930s, that social problems were simply derivative of economic ones. Compared to Abram Harris, an economics professor at Howard who earned his Ph.D. from Columbia in 1930, Haynes was an old-guard "race leader" who stressed civil rights, dignity, and culture alongside economic prosperity. Though the Great Migration might be understood as an economic event, the challenges that it posed required social as well as economic solutions. For Haynes, social science and social work were fundamentally related. For Harris, social science merely justified socialism.

Haynes's vision of racial uplift facilitated by "Negro economics" required leadership by highly educated black social workers who would enforce high cultural norms. Haynes was not a black nationalist, but he understood the importance of black identity. It was a "scientific principle" that "similar color and appearance produces a sense

¹²⁶Wilson, *Segregated Scholars*, 133.

¹²⁷Paul Schor, *Counting Americans: How the U.S. Census Classified the Nation* (Oxford, 2017), Ch. 18; Wilson, *Segregated Scholars*, 85, 133, 211; Frederica H. Barrow, "Forrester Blanchard Washington and His Advocacy for African Americans in the New Deal," *Social Work* 52/3 (2007), 201–8; Jill Watts, *The Black Cabinet* (New York, 2020).

¹²⁸George E. Haynes, report, 8 July 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-C, NARA. Haynes, answers to George L. Boyle, n.d. April 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-A. Haynes, "Report: Impressions from a Preliminary Study of Negroes of Harlem" 1921/1922, MG 207, Box 1 Folder 2, Schomburg Library, New York City.

¹²⁹Haynes, Report, 8 July 1919, 174.3.5, 8/102-C, NARA.

¹³⁰Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 29.

of likeness and out of that sense of likeness grows a consciousness of kinship or kind." The people who understood the systemic and daily struggles of black wage earners "in finding houses in which to live, in finding suitable educational facilities for his children, in finding satisfactory church life ... and in finding assurance for that great overflowing warmth of emotion and fellow feeling, must live with Negroes, must share with them the life of the Negro world. Only Negro leaders live within that world."¹³¹ Harris saw things differently. Frustrated with capitalism, Harris understood racial conflict in terms of economic materialism. His concern, both academic and social, revolved around fundamental economic reform. "As long as capitalism remains," Harris wrote, "it is reasonably certain that the main arteries of commerce, industry, credit and finance will be controlled by white capitalists."¹³²

Jonathan Holloway has referred to Harris as the "first important" black economist.¹³³ Holloway points to the fact that Haynes's Ph.D. was in social economy and Harris's in "economics proper." But the real difference was that Haynes was simply a different kind of economist: an optimistic institutionalist rather than a disenchanting marginalist. Haynes, like his German-educated teachers, did not consider racial prejudice (or difference) as merely economic. They were historical realities, baked into black economic life. Harris, on the other hand, saw the legacy of slavery less in historical terms than in psychological ones. "Race sentiments," Harris contended, constituted "a social attitude not obviously linked up with past economic environment," but, rather, "concatenated in emotional attitudes." Black Americans responded to economic incentives just as white Americans did. But more than that, black Americans responded the way white Americans did to the same social forces.¹³⁴

The parallels with the *Methodenstreit* of the nineteenth century are striking. Like the older historical school of economics, Haynes's economics embedded economic data within a larger social and historical totality. Like the new marginalists of the neoclassical revolution, Harris focused on psychological "emotional" dimensions.¹³⁵ Moreover, like historicism, the DNE's economics was not about consumption, but rather about labor and production. Though Forrester Washington encouraged cooperatives in Chicago ("too much of the money that is being earned by the colored group at present remains in their hands only for a short time; then goes to the hands of others"), in general the Division of Negro Economics did not truck with the vision of cooperative consumption outlined by Du Bois starting in the 1900s or with Marcus Garvey's campaign to convince African Americans "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work."¹³⁶

¹³¹George E. Haynes, "Negro Leadership of Negro Workers in Industrial Plants," 22 Oct. 1920, DNE, RG 174.4.7, [Correspondence], NARA.

¹³²Abram Harris, *The Negro as Capitalist* (Philadelphia, 1936), x.

¹³³Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 88.

¹³⁴Abram Harris, "The Negro and Economic Radicalism," *Modern Quarterly* 2 (1925), 198–208, quoted in Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 107–9.

¹³⁵Erik Grimmer-Solem, *The Rise of Historical Economics and Social Reform in Germany, 1864–1894* (Oxford, 2003). Emma Rothschild, "Political Economy," in Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Glaeyes, eds., *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2011).

¹³⁶Forrester B. Washington to Negro Workers Advisory Committee, 17 June 1919, in Division of Negro Economics, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction* 73.

Black economic thinkers were well aware of the importance of consumption. Writing in 1906 in the precursor to the *American Economic Review*, Du Bois outlined the advantages of semi-autarkic African American economic communities, independent of white employers and custom.¹³⁷ Sadie Mossell (later Alexander) wrote her doctoral dissertation on the standard of living among recently arrived migrants in Philadelphia. A reasonable standard of living (through consumption), Alexander hypothesized, would ease adjustment.¹³⁸ Decades later, Haynes himself would briefly serve as the secretary of a black consumers' cooperative in Harlem, even as he stressed interracial cooperation and integration while working for the Federal Council of Churches.¹³⁹

Yet work, not spending, was the focus of Haynes's DNE. The Division of Negro Economics was premised on thinking of the Great Migration as an economic issue, understanding a set of interrelated social phenomena through an economic lens. This meant attending, first and foremost, to wage-earning labor. Doing so meant assuming a fundamental similarity of black and white people as economic actors, particularly as workers. Haynes and the other thinkers at the heart of this story were "race men," set on uplift and (in varying degrees) hostile to the "backward" cultural norms of poor black southerners. Yet by treating black people as economic agents, they also made a claim about the subordinate position of cultural patterns to economic ones. Black workers, Haynes repeatedly noted, were reacting to economic stimuli in effectively the same way as white workers were: a line that would be taken up as black union participation surged in the 1930s.

Over time, Haynes himself became increasingly committed to black union participation, a subject he had been reluctant to address while at the DNE. In the late 1920s, he was involved in mediating discussions between the Pullman Company and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, though by 1932 he still insisted that the Federal Council of Churches not encourage "ideas of collective bargaining," but rather "undertake labor education in labor problems."¹⁴⁰ But as the Depression deepened, Haynes increasingly understood unions as a tool for improving black "economic life." He became a staunch supporter of the Wagner Act. And in a September 1934 speech in Oklahoma City, Haynes even called for black churches to "become the place where ... [Black Americans] learn about labor organizations and the technique of collective bargaining."¹⁴¹

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¹³⁷W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Economic Future of the Negro," *Publications of the American Economic Association* 7/1 (1906), 219–42.

¹³⁸Sadie Tanner Mossell, *The Standard of Living among One Hundred Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1921).

¹³⁹Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (State College, 2014), 135; press release, 15 Oct. 1936, JWJ 101 Box 4, Folder 22, Beinecke.

¹⁴⁰Minutes of a meeting of the Survey Committee, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ, 1 Oct. 1932, JWJ 101 Box 4, Folder 21, Beinecke.

¹⁴¹Ibid.; George E. Haynes, "Negro Churches, What Now?," 7 Sept. 1934, JWJ 101 Box 4, Folder 23, Beinecke.

People, black and white, responded to higher wages. People, black and white, sought to better themselves. People, black and white, could benefit from organizing their labor. The difference was in the historical trajectory. Economics depended on context, not on biological difference. At the heart of the work of the Division of Negro Economics was the assumption and the assertion that all people, regardless of race, were equally human, equally governed by economic phenomena, and equally “rational” in an economic sense. This is not the same as suggesting that all people, regardless of race, faced the same economic challenges or were offered the same economic opportunities, as some racial liberals contended. Race mattered. It mattered not just as an impersonal “subscript or variable,” but instead, as Trevon Logan has recently written, as a marker “of a group of people caught up in the social, legal, and economic relations that make up systemic racism.” As Logan points out, understanding racial oppression or injustice—particularly slavery—as merely “an economic phenomenon” often obscures a larger picture of race as a “dynamic experiential condition.”¹⁴² The people who worked for the Division of Negro Economics were attuned to that condition; they lived it. For them, describing the Great Migration as an *economic* phenomenon was not an act of misunderstanding, but a purposeful choice. It was a choice that, in its omissions as much as in its framing, was tailored to resonate with a prejudiced audience.

This serves as a reminder that economics was not the exclusive rhetorical tool of reactionaries. Though prominent early twentieth-century economists leveraged economic arguments to justify white supremacy and brutal crackdowns on organized labor, economic statistics were also a favored medium of progressive reformers. As Thomas Stapleford and others have shown, in the 1920s economics began to emerge as a new repertoire for a whole range of US political actors to make arguments about public life.¹⁴³ Haynes and his team provide a case in point.

The story of the DNE offers a further lesson about a much-critiqued aspect of economic thinking: the assumption of “economic rationality.” The urge to model human beings as *homo economicus* has been held responsible, variously, for famine in colonial India, growing inequality, recurrent financial crises, and our current climate emergency.¹⁴⁴ These charges may be justified. But collectively, they risk obscuring a positive side of the assumption of economic rationality. One of the key promises of economic rationality as an assumption is a (perhaps naive) egalitarianism. If humans should be understood as economic agents, then *all* humans should be so understood. Assumptions of universal rationality have often been naive or purposefully unseeing in the sense that they have neglected or overlooked cultural variation, institutional barriers, or systemic prejudices, often with a hubristic surety. This was especially true of market fundamentalists who emerged after World War II. Yet belief in a common human economic rationality need not imply an unfettered market nor a simplistic

¹⁴²Trevon D. Logan, “American Enslavement and the Recovery of Black Economic History,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 36/2 (2022), 81–98, at 82–3.

¹⁴³On numerical reasoning as a mode of public discourse see William Deringer, *Calculated Values* (Cambridge, 2018); Eli Cook, *The Pricing of Progress* (Cambridge, 2017); Stapleford, *The Cost of Living*.

¹⁴⁴Fredrik Albritton Jonsson and Carl Wennerlind, *Scarcity* (Cambridge, 2023). Milan Zafirovski, “The Rational Choice Generalization of Neoclassical Economics Reconsidered,” *Sociological Theory* 18/3 (2000), 448–71.

view that only self-interest is “rational.”¹⁴⁵ Amidst all the damage caused by totalizing views of human rationality, it is easy to overlook the basic egalitarian premise of the assumption. It is among the values that made Adam Smith such a critic of slavery and imperial domination and it animated Marquis de Condorcet’s optimism about the moral progress of humanity.¹⁴⁶ It stands behind more recent efforts undertaken by economists to help the very poor around the world by studying them as economic decision makers.¹⁴⁷

The discourse of economic thinking is malleable and adaptable, accessible and deployable by a diverse group of economic thinkers. Though it has not always led to optimal, or desirable, outcomes, the assumption of shared human economic traits has a streak of radical egalitarianism. It was that streak that George E. Haynes and others at the Division of Negro Economics recognized as rhetorically useful and affirming, and that streak that they leveraged when deploying the language of economics.

¹⁴⁵ Amartya Sen, “Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavior Foundations of Economic Theory,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6/4 (1977), 317–44.

¹⁴⁶ Emma Rothschild, “Adam Smith in the British Empire,” in Sankar Muthu, ed., *Empire and Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2012), 184–98; Condorcet and Keith Baker, “Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind,” *Daedalus* 133/3 (2004), 65–82.

¹⁴⁷ Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics* (New York, 2012).

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