



10-3-2022

Economic Trends Which Helped Spawn 60's Uprisings and Helped Pave the Way for Affirmative Action in Employment and Admissions

Mark Naison

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.library.fordham.edu/baahp_essays

 Part of the African American Studies Commons

Economic Trends Which Helped Spawn 60's Uprisings and Helped Pave the Way for Affirmative Action in Employment and Admissions

The following short summary of economic trends affecting the nation's Black population in the post WW 2 era are an essential backdrop to analyzing the rise of Affirmative Action in employment and education in the late 1960's and early 1970's. It will help explain why uprisings took place in so many urban black communities in the middle and late 1960's, with the largest taking place in Los Angeles, Newark and Detroit, and why a critical portion of the nation's leaders, along with a significant portion of the politically aware black population, felt that color blind civil rights law could not address the level of exclusion Black people experienced in the most dynamic sections of the economy in the 1960's.

As highlighted in the following short article I posted on the Fordham Library Digital Archive- *The Unacknowledged Economic and Political Forces Which Shaped the Rise of Rock and Roll* the most rapid economic progress achieved by Black people in US History took place from 1940-1950 when millions of Black people left the South for urban centers in the Northeast, Midwest and Far West, and when high paying jobs opened up for Black people in the nations manufacturing centers as a result of a wartime labor shortage and President Roosevelt's executive order banning discrimination in defense industries. These jobs-in steel mills and factories manufacturing cars, electrical appliances, ships and planes- along with government employment in positions acquired through civil service exams, created the basis for a sizable group of Black people with middle class incomes in Northern cities and even in some portions of the South. This economic transformation spawned a wave of optimism in Black communities throughout the nation even though the color blind anti-discrimination law at the time, epitomized by the Ives Quinn Bill in New York State in 1945, failed to have any effect at all on discrimination in the construction industry, in banking and insurance, and in new manufacturing industries like pharmaceuticals. So great were the gains in manufacturing, which continued through the early to mid 1950's because Europe and Japan were still rebuilding from the war, that the dangers of basing Black prosperity on that one area were less apparent than the prosperity itself.

However, by the mid 1960's, the whole economic landscape for Black people in American cities had begun to shift. As countries like Germany, England, France and especially Japan rebuilt their shattered economies, they began to produce steel, aluminum and consumer goods as efficiently and more cheaply than their American counterparts. As a result, high paying jobs in manufacturing -- the path to entering the middle class for Black youth in America's cities- began to shrink in the very years the Southern Civil Rights movement was achieving its greatest victories, the late 1950's and early 1960's.

By the middle 1960's, many black young people were facing less promising economic prospects than their parents. Barred by rampant discrimination from working in construction, banking, insurance and corporate sales, the fastest growing sectors of the US economy in the Sixties, trapped in hyper-segregated neighborhoods by widespread housing discrimination and over aggressive policing, a critical mass of Black people in the North were becoming disillusioned with mainstream civil rights leaders and primed for revolt.

Color Blind anti-discrimination law did nothing to address the deteriorating economic position of Blacks in the cities of the Northeast, Midwest, and Far West. When Title VII of the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, banning discrimination in employment, but preventing the use of quotas and numerical targets to achieve that goal, it didn't open up jobs in the highest paying sectors of the economy from which Black people were excluded

It took riots and uprisings- occurring for 4 straight years- to provoke business and government leaders to use behind the scenes pressure and public exposure to make that Black people got jobs in "lily white" industries, using the very numerical indicators to identify discrimination that Title VII appeared to ban. These measures, ranging from the Nixon Administration's Philadelphia Plan, to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's monitoring of the racial composition of the entire US workforce during the Johnson Administration, opened up hundreds of thousands of new jobs for Black people in the cities around the nation, some in industries where Blacks were already employed, others in industries which had rigid color bars in hiring.

Color Blind law could not bring about that change. What we call "Affirmative Action" could. Thus began an effort to make sure every sector of the US economy, especially its most dynamic and rapidly expanding ones, hired Black people in substantial enough numbers to quell unrest, while its major universities transformed their admissions policies to try to expand Black representation in the nation's leadership class.