

Negroes

PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS FOR THE NEGRO WORKER

By  
Herman P. Miller

(MR-30)

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Much as I am delighted to participate in this symposium, I feel obligated to warn you that I am no expert on Negro affairs. My only qualification for being here at all is that I have spent more years than I care to count at the Census Bureau where many of the basic statistics about Negro life are collected. It takes far more than a knowledge of statistics, however, to qualify as an expert on Negro affairs today. Tons of literature are produced each year about Negro behavior, personality, culture patterns, the civil rights movement, the Negro revolution, and many other aspects of Negro life about which my opinions and sources of information are no more valid than your own.

My presence here, I suppose, is intended to provide a factual base for what might otherwise degenerate into an exchange of impressions and prejudices. As a statistician, I am often cast in the role of one of these fellows who, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, "always have an ill-conditioned fact or two that they lead after them into decent company like so many bull dogs, ready to let them slip at every ingenious suggestion or convenient generalization or pleasant fancy." I do not mind this role because I find that too often we are ruled by pleasant

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\*A talk by Dr. Herman P. Miller, Institute of Government and Public Affairs UCLA and U.S. Bureau of the Census at a symposium on Negro History Week held at the UCLA campus in February 1965.

fancies rather than by brute facts. There is room in our lives for both fact and fancy. Unfortunately, it often takes a very wise man to know the difference.

I have decided to focus on the general area of employment in my talk here today because it is a subject of vital importance to the Negro and it is also one for which there is a vast storehouse of statistical data. The particular aspect of the problem that I intend to explore is the change in the occupational distribution of whites and Negroes during the past 50 years. Census information on this subject goes back to 1910. Thanks to the efforts of the Conservation of Human Resources Project at Columbia University and the work of other research organizations in this field we are now beginning to supplant impressionistic judgments with scholarly evaluations.

In any discussion of white and Negro differentials over time it is important to distinguish between absolute and relative changes. Although this distinction is very important, it is often overlooked. If you think about the problem for a minute the difference between absolute and relative changes will appear quite obvious and you will recognize its importance. There has been a general upgrading of occupational skills for both whites and Negroes as the American economy has moved from agriculture and become more complex and industrialized. As a result, Negroes who were once highly concentrated in sharecropping and farm labor have now moved up to unskilled and semiskilled factory jobs. Appreciable numbers have even moved into white-collar employment. This change has raised the skills of the Negro labor force, it has increased their productivity, and it is in large measure responsible for the vast improvement in their levels of living. If we take what is perhaps the single most important aspect of life that we attempt to measure, namely life expectancy itself, we find that the Negro

infant born in 1960 could expect to live 21 years longer than her mother born in 1920. This represents a gain of nearly 50 per cent in life expectancy in a relatively brief span of 40 years. Not only are Negroes living longer, but they are also living far better than ever before. Negro housing, for example, may still leave much to be desired; but, the proportion living in dilapidated homes was cut in half between 1950 and 1960. The real incomes of Negroes have also shown a remarkable rise. Between 1940 and 1960 the wages and salaries of the average male Negro worker rose from about \$1000 to about \$3000, both figures measured in terms of 1960 dollars. In other words, there was a threefold increase in Negro purchasing power during this period.

I could go on and on citing the gains that have been made by Negroes in recent years. It would not take very long, however, before you would begin to wonder why I fail to mention that there has been a parallel upgrading of jobs and levels of living for white workers as well. Here, of course, we get to the relative aspects of the problem. It is not enough to know how much or how fast the lot of the Negro is improving. The critical question in many minds, particularly for Negroes and their leaders, is whether the relative upward movement has been as great for Negroes as for whites. Sometimes this focus on relative position blinds critics to the fact that there has been an improvement in absolute status. For example, Tom Kahn who was Bayard Rustin's assistant in organizing the March on Washington recently wrote, "It takes a lot of running to stand still on the treadmill of this technologically advancing society. When you know you're running hard and everyone tells you you're moving at a fast clip, and yet the scenery around you remains the same, the most appropriate word to describe your reactions is...frustration." Yet, the fact is that the Negro has not been standing still and the scenery around him has been

changing most dramatically. He has had tremendous increases in life expectancy, purchasing power, levels of living, occupational classification, educational attainment, and significant improvements in many other aspects of life for which objective measures are available. The only reason many Negroes feel they are standing still is that the whites too have had these gains and in many areas the gap between the whites and Negroes does not appear to be narrowing. It is on these aspects of the problem that I will concentrate today. How has Negro employment changed over the past 50 years? How has it changed relative to the whites? What are the prospects for a narrowing of white-Negro differentials in employment?

By 1910, the white labor force had already completed much of the transition from agriculture to industry. In the census taken in that year, only one-fourth of the white workers were employed in farming; another one-fourth worked in white-collar jobs; and the remaining one-half were more or less equally divided among craftsmen, factory operatives, and nonfarm laborers or service workers. In that same year, 1910, the Negro labor force was split 50-50 between farming and nonfarm work. The farmers were, of course, largely southern sharecroppers or laborers working and living under the most miserable conditions, even by contemporary standards. Those who were not working as farmers were employed largely as service workers (i.e., domestics, waiters, bootblacks and similar jobs) and as nonfarm laborers largely on railroads and construction gangs. Relatively few (only 5 per cent) had even risen to the point of semiskilled factory work and even fewer (only 3 per cent) worked as craftsmen or as white-collar workers.

The next 50 years witnessed a dramatic movement out of agriculture for both whites and Negroes. This movement, by the way, must soon grind

to a halt for the very simple reason that we are running out of farmers to be moved. At present, only about 7 per cent of the white workers are farmers as compared with 28 per cent at the turn of the century. The biggest increase is, of course, in white collar work. Nearly one out of two white workers is now employed in a white-collar job. At the turn of the century, only one out of four white workers were in this category.

The shift away from farming was even more dramatic for Negroes than for whites. As I mentioned earlier, in 1910 one-half of the Negro workers were employed in farming; in 1960, this proportion dropped to only one-tenth. The frequent cry of some economists for greater mobility as a solution to rural poverty has certainly been heeded by the Negro. He has shown tremendous mobility and energy in search of economic opportunity often against overwhelming odds. The displacement of Negroes from farming has largely been absorbed by the manual and service trades. At present, about one-third of the Negroes are service workers; another one-third are nonfarm laborers or semiskilled factory workers; and the remaining 20 per cent are craftsmen or white-collar workers. Until about 1940, the occupational shift for Negroes was almost exclusively from farming into employment as domestic, factory hands, and laborers. In recent years, opportunities in white-collar employment have been growing in importance.

A close examination of the decennial census data provides better insight than we have ever had before of the way in which the transformation of the Negro labor force took place. In each decade, as new industries and occupations developed it was the white worker who moved in first.



According to one analysis by Professor Hiestand of Columbia University (Economic Growth and Employment Opportunities for Minorities), "white workers capture the newly growing fields in which labor resources are scarce, pay levels are good, prospects for advancement are bright, the technology is most advanced, and <sup>working</sup>/conditions the most modern." They leave in their wake jobs in the older industries which become less desirable because the pay is not as good nor are the prospects for advancement. Moreover, many of the jobs left behind by the whites were in industries dominated by an old technology, which when replaced, would be likely to require reduced manpower needs. Thus, in every decade, the newest and best opportunities available to the Negroes <sup>often</sup> were/quite vulnerable. The jobs deserted by the whites were invariably better than the ones at which Negroes were employed at the time. They were, nonetheless, not the jobs with the bright futures. This pattern of occupational change is as we shall soon see, of great significance in assessing the prospects of the Negro for narrowing the occupational gap between himself and the whites. It suggests that if the Negro is ever to approach occupational equality with the whites he must seek out and somehow gain admittance to the "frontier area of occupational expansion." If he continues to get only those jobs that the white has left over, he may never bridge the occupational gap. Indeed some would argue that if the Negro follows the traditional pattern of occupational mobility, he may find himself in a tighter and tighter job squeeze because the employment that would have normally been handed down to him is being automatated.

It must be granted on the basis of the empirical evidence that the absolute position of the Negro worker, with respect to employment, has improved considerably in the past 50 years. The problem to which we shall



now turn in an examination of the extent to which the relative gap between whites and Negroes has changed. In the work previously referred to, Professor Hiestand of Columbia University constructed an occupational index which permits this type of comparison to be made. He first separated the white and Negro workers for each year into seven occupational groups: professional, managerial, clerical and sales, skilled, semiskilled, unskilled laborers, and agriculture. A weight was then assigned to each occupation that was roughly indicative of the relative earning power for that kind of work. The actual weights used were the median incomes reported in the 1950 Census for workers who were employed out through the year. A weighted index for each year was then constructed by multiplying the proportion of workers in each occupation by the weight and summing the results for all seven occupation groups. This operation was performed separately for white and Negro men and women. The ratio of the Negro to the white index which was computed for each year shows the relative occupational position of Negroes to whites.

In the case of men, the index shows no significant change between 1910 and 1940. There was some slight improvement in the relative occupational position of Negro men during the past 20 years; but this is entirely due to their movement out of the South. Indexes which have been constructed on a state-by-state basis show that there were very few significant changes in the occupational distribution of Negro males relative to whites in the past 20 years.

The relative occupational distribution of Negro women relative to whites was about the same in 1940 as it was in 1910. As in the case of the males, there appears to have been some improvement in the relative occupational position of Negro women during the past 20 years, but this change may

also be primarily due to their movement of of the South with its very limited opportunities for Negro employment, rather than to any general upgrading of the kinds of jobs open to Negroes. The weight of the evidence therefore is strongly in support of the view that although there has been considerable occupational improvement for Negro workers during the past 50 years in an absolute senses, the position of Negroes relative to whites has not changed much.

Having established these facts, we may not turn to an examination of their meaning, particularly with respect to assessing their significance for future trends in Negro employment. Here we must tread with care because, as so many forecasters have discovered to their regret, past is not necessarily prologue. The Roman emperor Constantius made a law forbidding "anyone to consult a soothsayer, a mathematician, or a forecaster---May curiosity to foretell the future be silenced forever," proclaimed the emperor. So be it; but I doubt very much that even the penalty of death dampened the enthusiasm of forecasters in ancient Rome. There is even less hope of stopping them today when so many economists and statisticians have been driven to earn their living by this vicious practice.

The weight of the statistical evidence is that the fate of the Negro worker is very much tied in with the fate of the economy as a whole. During previous periods of vigorous economic growth white workers moved ahead very rapidly and Negro workers followed in their wake, generally picking up the jobs that were left behind. There was some movement of Negroes into the expanding areas of the economy, but the numbers were small relative to the total. Both groups moved ahead more or less proportionately as a result of the job opportunities made available by the process of growth. It is difficult to say at this point in time whether this pattern would continue

if we were once again to enter on an extended period of vigorous economic growth. Of course, one might say that we are now going through such a period having experienced growth rates in our national product of about 5 per cent for the past three years. Although these growth rates considerably in excess of our long-run national average, they are associated with painfully high unemployment rates for Negro workers suggesting that there is a shortage of job opportunities. The evidence, however, is by no means conclusive. There are many who would argue that it is still too soon to judge whether a more rapidly growing economy can provide full employment for Negroes (without inflation) despite the elimination of hundreds of thousands of unskilled and semiskilled jobs they formerly manned. The point has been made that it may take several years of vigorous growth to absorb the manpower slack that developed during the slow years since 1957. Moreover, the blind forces of the economy may have to be helped along by manpower training programs which will fit the Negro (and the displaced white workers) for new types of work.

It is understandably of great importance to the Negro not only to improve his situation, but also to narrow the gap between himself and the whites. This feeling must not be ascribed to any special perversity on the part of the Negro worker. Rather it is a reflection of a prevalent attitude in our society which has long been recognized by economists and taken into account by them in explaining economic behavior. The British economist, Pigou, described the matter rather well around the turn of the century when he wrote that "men do not desire to be rich, but to be richer than other men."

What is the likelihood that the Negro will in fact be able to narrow the occupational gap between himself and the whites? This question is

difficult to answer. The one thing that seems clear from the data is that the gap will not be narrowed if the traditional patterns of occupational change are maintained. In order to catch up with the whites, Negro workers will have to be propelled into promising new jobs in new industries instead of drifting into the old jobs in the dying industries, as they have done in the past. This change will come about for Negroes only if two conditions are met. They must obtain the education and training required for the new jobs and the barriers to their entry into the better-paying fields must be lowered. The prospects that both of these conditions will be met in the near future are not very good. It is unrealistic to talk about bridging the occupational gap in the modern world when one-fourth of the Negro youth in their early twenties have not gone beyond the eighth grade and over half have not completed high school. There is not much that people with so little education can be trained to do in our complex economy. Even if the Negro showed more interest in education than the above figures imply, there is little evidence that society is willing to make the huge investments in education and training that are required if the Negro is ever to be able to compete on equal terms with the white in the labor market. Most attempts, to provide effective school integration have met with hostility and "foot-dragging." Even in the prosperous North there has been more lip service than action in the improvement of the quality of education in deprived areas. Finally, we come to just plain discrimination which may be the hardest of all obstacles to overcome because it is so deeply imbedded in our culture. We sometimes forget that about 60 per cent of the Negroes still live in the South and according to any reasonable assumptions regarding rates of out-migration, nearly half of them will still be in that region by 1980. In view of the intensity of feeling that has been manifested by the southern whites on racial matters

it is hard to believe that Negroes in this region will receive to any great extent either the training they need or the opportunity to move into the more promising jobs. In view of these and many other factors, I see little reason to be optimistic about the possibility of narrowing the occupational gap between the races in the foreseeable future. There are, however, offsetting forces which provide some hope.

At present, there is probably less discrimination against Negroes than at any previous time in our history. It is also likely that discrimination will tend to decrease with time because of the strong pressures being exerted by the Federal Government. These efforts should create new

opportunities for Negro employment in Federal, State, and local governments, in private companies doing contract work for the Federal Government, and in other companies that will be under social pressure to liberalize their employment practices.

At the same time that the prospects for Negroes to obtain skilled employment has been increasing, the attitudes of the Negro leaders have been undergoing a change. In the past, the civil rights movement focused attention largely on efforts designed to publicize the plight of the Negro and to promote integration. This emphasis led to the March on Washington, demonstrations, sit-ins, picketing, and other activities that were instrumental in promoting passage of the civil rights and anti-poverty legislation. Partly as a result of this success, but also because the Negro leadership may feel that the end of the line has been reached with this kind of effort, attention is now shifting to the fight for better jobs, education, and housing with only secondary emphasis on integration. This attitude was clearly expressed by Bayard Rustin when he said recently,

"We have got to lift the school problem from integration to that of quality schools; which has to include, we say, integration secondarily." Implicit in a remark such as this is recognition of the importance of developing the skills and qualities that are needed by Negro workers in order to take full advantage of the job opportunities that may arise. As Nathan Glazer has pointed out very effectively in a recent article in Commentary magazine, the legislative gains that have been made by Negroes in the past few years make it possible and perhaps even necessary for contemporary leaders of the civil rights movement to return to the fundamental policies outlined by Booker T. Washington at the turn of the century. According to Glazer, Booker T. Washington "saw that the Negro had been denuded by slavery of the qualities necessary for building an independent and satisfying life. Primarily what concerned him -----was the devaluation of work produced by slavery, for he felt that independent and productive work was the basis of racial respect. But Washington also assumed that the Negroes, as they gained in education and income, would be enfranchised and would be able to play a major role in politics and in the shaping of their own fate. He fought desperately against the movement to disenfranchise Negroes in the South in the 1890's. When this movement succeeded, and Jim Crow began to fasten its bonds on the Negro people, he was left with half a program. The other half became the program of 'protest.'" Glazer then goes on to state that "we now have a situation which corresponds----- to the one Booker T. Washington first saw as his major task, the building up of the economic and social foundations of the Negro community."

The point is that so long as the Negro could see no reasonable prospect for advancement beyond the most menial jobs, he was behaving more or less rationally in assigning a low value to education, saving, and the other fruitful avenues to advancement. Limited opportunities for employment in the professional fields forced Negroes to concentrate on those areas where there was a Negro market for their services--preaching, teaching and social work. Because of their concentration in these low-paid fields the average Negro college graduate, even today, can expect to earn less over a lifetime than the white who does not go beyond the eighth grade. In view of facts such as these who could argue with the young school dropout who might feel what James Baldwin has expressed so well in the following words: "It is not to be wondered at that if ----- studying is going to prepare him only to be a porter or an elevator boy - or his teacher - well, then, to hell with it."

But, we now have a chance to change all of this. Whether in fact we will depends upon two things: the extent to which our society opens up and takes the Negro in as full-fledged participating member; and the extent to which the Negro is prepared to move in should the opportunities present themselves. Only time will tell whether or not we can succeed in getting both of these forces to move in the right direction at the right time.