Minorities in the Depression

The Great Depression and the New Deal, 1999

The Great Depression of the 1930s brought hard times to many in the United States, and especially trying times to racial and ethnic minorities, most of whom had never shared in the prosperity of the 1920s. Always the last hired and first fired in the cities, their jobless rate soared far above that for whites as fierce competition for industrial work compounded traditional employer racism and discriminatory union policies. In the South, where three-quarters of the nation's 12 million African Americans resided, and where most worked as sharecroppers, tenant farmers, or wage hands, and in the Southwest, where most of the nearly 2 million Spanish-speaking residents from Mexico worked as agricultural stoop laborers, the depression brought near-starvation incomes and bare subsistence living—or less.

THE UNDERSIDE OF THE NEW DEAL

At the bottom rungs of the economic ladder, racial and ethnic minorities needed New Deal assistance the most; but no one initially received less. Most early New Deal relief and recovery programs routinely excluded or discriminated against minorities. This was true for a number of reasons. First, the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945) depended on the support of segregationist southern Democrats in Congress, who controlled the key committee chairmanships. Second, most New Deal programs were administered by local officials beholden to entrenched local interests and prejudices. Third, the depression gave priority to economic recovery rather than reform. And finally, previous poverty and powerlessness had left blacks and Mexican Americans with little or no political leverage.

Thus, the labor codes of the National Recovery Administration (NRA) tolerated lower wages for minorities; the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) benefited landlords at the expense of farm tenants and laborers; the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) maintained segregated work camps and kept minorities out of training programs that would lead to their advancement; the Works Progress Administration (WPA) ended eligibility for aliens who had not applied for U.S. citizenship before 1937, which cut off Mexicans and others (including Filipinos, even though the Philippines was a U.S. commonwealth) from the job program; the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) encouraged residential segregation; and neither the National Labor Relations Act nor the Social Security Act made any provisions for domestics or farm laborers, whose ranks were disproportionately composed of racial minorities.

RACISM AND ACTIVISM

Lynchings and miscarriages of justice continued as some Americans expressed their frustration with their hard times by turning to racial aggression. Twenty-four blacks died by lynching in 1933 alone. Although the numbers declined thereafter, each year of the depression witnessed at least one more racial murder. In Scottsboro, Alabama, eight black youths were sentenced to death by an all-white jury in 1931 on very dubious evidence that they had raped two white women. The U.S. Supreme Court twice reversed the verdicts. In Powell v. Alabama (1932), the Court maintained that the defendants had been denied due process when the trial judge failed to provide them with adequate legal counsel. And in Norris v. Alabama (1935), the Court said that the systematic exclusion of blacks from Alabama juries had denied them equal protection of the law. The rulings established constitutional principles that would significantly benefit minorities in the long run. But further trials of the Scottsboro boys in the 1930s kept them unjustly behind
Most minorities did not accept racism and discrimination passively in the depression decade. They demonstrated for equality and justice on a scale and with an intensity unknown in any previous decade. Mexican Americans battled in the courts to halt the deportation of Hispanics; worked to channel relief funds into Spanish-speaking communities, an effort spearheaded by Dennis Chavez (1888-1962) of New Mexico, the only Latino in the Senate; and struggled in lettuce fields and citrus groves to organize the Confederation of Unions of Mexican Workers and Farm Laborers and to strike for better pay and working conditions. Under the banner "Don't Shop Where You Can't Work," African-American protesters boycotted businesses that hired only whites. Negro newspapers railed against New Deal measures that failed to assist blacks. The National Urban League lobbied for economic aid to African Americans. And the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) fought in the courts and legislatures against lynching, racial discrimination in federal programs, and the denial of voting rights.

THE BLACK CABINET

In time, the angry protests of civil rights groups, coupled with Roosevelt's desire to gain the political allegiance of racial minorities, brought modest changes. The president assured an audience at the predominantly black Howard University that there would be no forgotten races in his administration. And he did appoint more than 100 African Americans to positions as race-relations advisers, a larger number of blacks in government than any previous administration. Known as the Black Cabinet, and headed by Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), the director of the Office of Minority Affairs in the National Youth Administration (NYA), this group prodded the New Deal toward a fairer share for minorities.

The Public Works Administration (PWA), for example, guided by the sympathetic views of its director, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes (1874-1952), established the first quota system for hiring minorities in proportion to their percentage of the local work force. The PWA and the United States Housing Authority (USHA) earmarked one-third of all the housing units it built for blacks. The Farm Security Administration (FSA) allocated about one-quarter of its budget to minority farm workers; the NYA spent about the same percentage of its appropriations on minority students. Following Roosevelt's executive order banning discrimination in WPA projects, African Americans constituted between 15 and 20 percent of all WPA employees. Moreover, largely as a consequence of New Deal measures, the percentage of black workers in skilled and semiskilled jobs increased from 23 to 29 percent during the 1930s; the median family income of African Americans rose relative to that of whites; black illiteracy was cut by one-third; and by 1939 life expectancy had jumped from 49 to 55 years for African-American women and from 47 to 52 years for black men.

THE COURTS

Roosevelt's appointments to the Supreme Court also aided the cause of minorities. With the exception of James Byrnes (1879-1972), FDR's eight nominees to the high court significantly sided with minorities in a series of rulings on voting rights, jury selection, wage inequity, real-estate bias, and discrimination in higher education. These decisions by the Roosevelt-era Court heralded the demise of the separate-but-equal doctrine established by Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and paved the way for the advances in civil rights formulated by the Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren (1891-1974) in the 1950s and 1960s.
Although not a presidential appointee, the president's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962), did more than anyone else to link the New Deal to the quest by minorities for justice and equality. "Nigger Lover" Eleanor, as some hate-mongering whites derided her, goaded New Deal bureaucrats into lessening discrimination in their programs. She openly entertained African Americans at the White House, publicly endorsed legislation to end lynching and the poll tax, and defied segregation in the South. When the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused to allow its Constitution Hall in Washington, DC, to be used for a concert by the famous black contralto Marian Anderson (1897-1993), Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the DAR and helped arrange for Anderson to sing to a massive audience in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

SHIFTING POLITICAL ALLIANCES

Though fearful of alienating the white South from the Democratic party, FDR also cautiously supported federal anti-lynching and anti-poll-tax legislation, and established a special Civil Rights Section of the Justice Department. In 1936, for the very first time, African Americans were accredited as delegates to the Democratic National Convention, invited to sit in the press box, and selected to offer the convention invocation, to deliver the welcome address, and to second the president's renomination. That year, also for the first time in history, a majority of black voters voted for a Democratic candidate for president. Breaking the link in blacks' minds between Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) and the Republican party had been very difficult for Roosevelt: While President Herbert Hoover (1874-1964), Roosevelt's Republican opponent in 1932, won only 31 percent of the white vote in Chicago, for instance, he claimed 77 percent of the black vote, even after four years of depression.

Thus, the majority black vote for Roosevelt in 1936 was an important mark of satisfaction with his administration's belated and at times halfhearted efforts on behalf of African Americans. In 1940, following Roosevelt's promise to include minorities in defense training and employment, his promotion of the first African American to the rank of brigadier general in the U.S. Army, and the inclusion of a special plank in the Democratic party platform pledging to strive for complete legislative safeguards against discrimination in government services and benefits, nearly 68 percent of the black electorate went for FDR. Despite the persistence of so much discrimination and segregation, those voters recognized that an era promising more opportunity and justice had begun.

NATIVE AMERICANS

Still greater changes in the concrete aspects of life came to Native Americans in the 1930s. The several hundred Indians living on reservations at the start of the depression, mostly in Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and South Dakota, suffered the worst poverty of any minority group. Their infant mortality rate was twice that of whites, and they suffered from an especially high incidence of alcoholism. To treat those problems and to bring needed change to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a bureaucracy with a long history of corruption and mismanagement, Roosevelt appointed John Collier (1884-1968) as commissioner of the BIA in 1933.

A reformer sympathetic to the desires of Native Americans to hold onto their tribal cultures and lands,
Collier made the BIA much more sensitive to Indian needs and respectful of Indian traditions and their quest for political autonomy. He made sure that the PWA, WPA, CCC, and NYA hired Native Americans; he insisted that federal grants be provided to local school districts, hospitals, and social-welfare agencies to assist Native Americans; and he became the driving force behind the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934. The IRA terminated the much-criticized land-allotment program of the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, provided funds for Indian tribes to purchase new lands, and repealed previous prohibitions on Native American languages, religions, and customs. Nearly three-quarters of the tribes supported Collier's reforms; however, it sparked bitter opposition among some Indians, including the Navajo, the nation's largest tribe. They viewed Collier as a sentimental outsider who thought he knew what was best for Native Americans and wanted to treat them as exotics in a living museum. Although Collier's hopes for full tribal self-government and the renewal of traditional tribal culture were only partially realized in the 1930s, his reassertion of the status of Indian tribes as semi-sovereign nations proved a vital legacy.

ASSESSMENT

The Great Depression and New Deal meant both change and continuity for the nation's minorities. Most remained mired in poverty, discriminated against, and segregated from white America. Yet new government precedents favorable to minorities, greater activism by civil rights organizations, and a spirit of reform that recognized minority needs as a part of the liberal agenda also spurred hopes for full equality and justice. That dream, in turn, would ignite still greater activism by minorities and greater progress toward their full participation in American life.

Further Readings

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