

Introduction

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than artificial forcing.—Booker T. Washington, 1895

Men have a right to demand that the members of a civilized community be civilized; that the fabric of human culture, so laboriously woven, be not wantonly ignorantly destroyed. Consequently a nation may rightly demand, even of a people it has consciously and intentionally wronged, not indeed complete civilization in thirty or one hundred years, but at least every effort and sacrifice possible on their part toward making themselves fit members of the community within a reasonable time.—W. E. B. DuBois, 1899

On September 18, 1895, Booker T. Washington cemented his status as the nation's most "responsible" black leader with an address before the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition outlining the proper role of blacks in the political economy of the New South. Less than a year before the United States Supreme Court handed down its ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the former slave-turned-principal of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute called upon members of his race to direct their attentions not to the rapid erosion of political and civil rights taking place throughout the south but to economic preparedness. Washington's speech, like his work at Tuskegee, proceeded from the view that neither blacks nor whites were ready for Afro-American equality. The freedmen and their descendants required time and guidance to equip themselves for the responsibilities of citizenship, while whites needed evidence of blacks' worthiness of inclusion in civil society.¹ Proffering a model of gradual racial progress predicated on self-help and the cultural evolution of Afro-Americans, the Wizard of Tuskegee's philosophy dovetailed with the economic aims and race ideology of southern business and political elites.² Indeed, as critics of the day noted, Washington's characterization of blacks as devoid of the intellectual tools necessary for

modern civilization helped legitimate the return of Bourbon rule and Republican indifference to the plight of the Negro in the south.

While Washington's "Atlanta Exposition" laid plain a particularly constrained vision of racial progress, many of his contemporaries shared a related faith in the ability of social guidance and moral probity to elevate the race. Just four years after the Wizard of Tuskegee's Atlanta address, W. E. B. DuBois, Washington's chief antagonist at the turn of the century, issued his own call for stewardship of the race's less-advanced elements in *The Philadelphia Negro*. DuBois's landmark study of Philadelphia's Seventh Ward undercut the charge that blacks were universally debauched by illuminating cultural and economic distinctions among the city's Afro-Americans. Though DuBois conceded the existence of a "vicious element" as well as a general "moral laxity" among black belt denizens, in contrast to the city's white reformers the Berlin-trained sociologist rooted the sources of ghetto malaise in specific social, rather than biological, processes.³ DuBois's research struck at the heart of racist justifications for inequality. Nevertheless, he viewed race relations through an evolutionary civilizationist frame similar to Washington's. DuBois believed that integration required that blacks embrace Victorian middle-class values such as thrift, temperance, monogamy, and industry. Identifying bourgeois cultural traits as the bedrock of modern civilization, he viewed acculturation as a means of both countering race prejudice and preparing Afro-Americans to be constructive citizens.⁴ Thus even as DuBois attributed social problems afflicting Philadelphia's black belt to structural as well as cultural influences, like the Wizard of Tuskegee, he perceived the moral guidance of the masses as crucial to the race's advancement.

Washington's and DuBois's identification of acculturation and self-help as integral components of racial progress was indicative of a broad philosophical shift occurring in Afro-American politics in the aftermath of Reconstruction. Collective self-help, or racial uplift, had been a major facet of black liberation projects since the dawn of the nineteenth century. Antebellum uplift endeavors such as the abolitionist and common school movements evinced an egalitarianism rooted in natural-rights ideology and Christian humanism. By the late nineteenth century, however, the democratic impulses that had informed uplift were vitiated by a building racial conservatism that suffused national culture and politics. America's tightening embrace of Social Darwinian notions of civilization had an especially significant impact on black uplift ideology. Portraying racial and class inequality as inexorable products of natural order, Social Darwinism and, later, eugenics became the dominant lenses through which to view these issues through the Great Depression. Afro-American reformers imbibed contemporary race and class conservatism,

leading many Progressive Era black leaders to base their claims to equality not on an inalienable right to liberty but on the race's capacity to evolve.⁵ In so doing, uplift substituted culture for race as a condition of admission to civil society. Racial uplift would as a result of this shift encompass a range of complex class perspectives of group advancement that often revealed their own inegalitarianism.

Since the 1980s, a growing body of scholarship has explored how the class identities of Afro-American Progressive Era activists shaped their visions of group advancement. Focusing largely on the stated goals and avowed perspectives of black reformers, much of the recent historiography on black uplift has claimed that the uniqueness of the black experience imbued Afro-American activists with class views that were necessarily distinct from those of their white counterparts. Historians Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham⁶ and Stephanie Shaw,⁷ for example, have each argued that whites' failure to acknowledge economic and cultural differences among Afro-Americans led middle-class black women to develop a sense of collective responsibility that generally muted the class tensions influencing other reform movements of the era. While these studies, as well as those by Glenda Gilmore, Paula Giddings, and Kevin Gaines,⁸ have greatly enhanced our understanding of how black reformers viewed themselves, their focus on activists' aims apart from close examination of their actual programs has led many to gloss over the class fissures dotting the landscape of black self-help. Presuming a necessary consonance between the asserted goals and deeds of middle-class Afro-American reformers, uplift historiography frequently takes for granted that racial uplift was comparatively free of the biases pervading contemporaneous reform movements.

This book attempts to make sense of the class perspectives shaping racial uplift through an examination of the ideology and policies of the National, New York, and Chicago Urban Leagues between 1910 and 1950. By viewing the League's reform ideology in the light cast by its actual programs, this study ultimately seeks to render a more complex account of both the class implications of black uplift and the nature of the Urban League's work than has been offered to date. Though I am critical of the League, my intent is not to impugn the motives of the countless men and women involved with the Urban League movement. Indeed, the writings and publications of prominent League staffers such as Charles S. Johnson, George E. Haynes, T. Arnold Hill, and Lester Granger leave little doubt that Urban Leaguers, like other black reformers, understood themselves to be committed to a broad vision of collective advancement. The issue addressed here, then, is not the sincerity of Urban Leaguers' commitment to racial progress. Rather, the book's focus is intended

to explore how particular class concerns and ideological influences shaped the League's vision of group advancement and the consequences of its endeavors. Examining the Urban League's work in housing, community development, job placement, vocational guidance, and union organizing, this project attempts to determine how the League defined the problems confronting black workers and tenants; the methods Urban Leaguers recommended for treating these ills; and, of course, which Afro-Americans were to benefit from League policy and why. The study also situates the League's activities within the broader ideological and social currents of its day, exploring the impact of migration, the Depression and the New Deal, World War II, and postwar downturns on the League's policies and philosophy.⁹

I have chosen to focus on the uplift programs of the Urban Leagues of New York and Chicago in particular largely because of the challenges confronting these organizations. Charged with the responsibility of meeting the needs of the nation's largest urban black communities, the New York and Chicago affiliates were forced to contend with massive migrant populations, discriminatory housing and labor markets, and a number of militant and radical political movements. The League's work in Chicago and New York also bore the distinct imprint of influential institutions, including philanthropic foundations, industrial and commercial business interests, and even universities. Though many of the difficulties confronted by the New York Urban League (NYUL) and Chicago Urban League (CUL) were typical to League affiliates, the branches themselves maintained important roles within the Urban League movement. Both the New York and National Leagues would, at different times, take responsibility for black Manhattan as well as the surrounding boroughs, ensuring personnel and methodological ties between the two. The Chicago League likewise trained a number of noteworthy National Urban League (NUL) staffers. Moreover, several individuals serving with each of these groups were, prominent academics, including Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, and Ira De Augustine Reid. Influenced by social unrest, philanthropic and business interests, and even intellectuals, the National, New York, and Chicago Urban Leagues offer valuable insights into the social and ideological forces undergirding the uplift projects of middle-class black reformers.

The origin and meaning of the Urban League's philosophy and approach have been subjects of serious scholarly debate. Since the 1970s, two distinct schools of thought have emerged regarding the influences shaping the League's work. In one camp, historian Nancy Weiss argues that the NUL's emphasis on self-help places the organization in the conservative tradition of Booker T. Washington.¹⁰ In the other, historian Jesse T. Moore contends that the

League's social-work focus stressed structural rather than behavioral remedies for inequality, leading the group to adopt an approach that owed more to the bourgeois militancy advanced by W. E. B DuBois's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) than the Tuskegee Institute.¹¹ While each author has contributed substantially to both Urban League and civil rights historiography, their stark assessments of the League obscure many of the complex issues shaping Afro-Americans' reform endeavors.¹² Indeed, Weiss's and Moore's claims ultimately rest on characterizations of Washington and DuBois that wave aside the thorny nature of the their respective uplift strategies.¹³ As a result, these authors' attempts to define the Urban League's philosophy as either conservative or militant lead each to sidestep proximate philosophical influences over the group and by extension some of the more important implications of its programs.

This study advances the view that the Urban League's uplift vision, from its inception through the Second World War, was shaped by theories of assimilation pioneered by the famed Chicago School of Sociology. Presuming the inherent plasticity of disparate peoples, Chicago School models of assimilation offered powerful antidotes to eugenicists' allegations regarding the innate deficiencies of blacks and other groups. Rather than leading Leaguers to focus on structural remedies for discrimination, the League's embrace of social science theory caused it to devote particular attention to the relationship between Afro-Americans' behavior and racial and economic inequality. In practice, this approach revealed sharply skewed class assumptions about migrants and poor Afro-Americans generally.

The Urban League's identification of social science theory as a tool for racial uplift grew organically from its mission. Established in 1910 by black sociologist George E. Haynes, the League was a social-work organization. Responding to the rising tide of migrants inundating New York and other northern cities, the Urban League's primary aim was "to promote and to do constructive and preventive social work for improving the social and economic conditions of Negroes in urban centers."¹⁴ To this end, the NUL and its locals not only performed field studies to assess the quality of black life but also used their research to guide their own uplift program. Though the Urban League expanded the scope of its activities during the New Deal and Second World War, its work centered on two related self-help strategies. First, the League attempted to prepare Afro-Americans for life in the industrial city. It offered blacks moral and vocational training intended to enhance their efficiency and attentiveness in both workplace and community. It would also assist migrants and longtime residents in locating appropriate housing, employment, and city services. Second, the Urban League encouraged employ-

ers, unions, and landlords to open jobs and housing to blacks. Leaguers hoped that this two-pronged approach would not only expand available employment and housing but over time bridge physical and psychological divisions between the races.

The League's emphasis on self-help undoubtedly reflected the paucity of options available to blacks in the early twentieth century. Its bare-bones practicality notwithstanding, the group's efforts to adjust Afro-Americans to urban life were likewise illustrative of its embrace of Chicago School theories of assimilation. As a social-work organization, the NUL and its Chicago and New York branches were staffed largely by trained sociologists and social workers. Versed in social science theories and methods, Leaguers incorporated sociological concepts into their assessments of black life. Two models of assimilation, ethnic cycle and social disorganization and reorganization, played especially important roles in the group's uplift strategy between the 1910s and 1940s. A facet of interaction cycle theory, ethnic cycle examined the social dynamics shaping relations between subordinate and dominant groups.¹⁵ Social disorganization and reorganization, on the other hand, focused on the forces shaping the values and attitudes of communities and individuals, devoting particular attention to the impact of migration and urbanization on the institutional strength of ethnic groups.¹⁶ Since both models traced the racial and ethnic tensions of the day to environmental rather than biological influences, they would naturally hold some appeal to Urban Leaguers. In the context of black migration, ethnic cycle and social disorganization and reorganization provided comparatively optimistic lenses through which to view the problems confronting urban blacks. But while these models struck crisp blows to racist assumptions about Afro-Americans and other groups, the implementation of programs influenced by Chicago School sociology frequently led Leaguers to emphasize the needs of the so-called Negro better classes at the expense of poor Afro-Americans.

The class perspectives shaping the League's uplift approach found clear expression in the housing and employment programs of the National, Chicago, and New York Leagues. Consistent with ethnic cycle theory, the League's work in these areas hinged on the group's ability to create harmonious interactions between blacks and whites. Indeed, the Urban League's attempts to open access to both better occupations and better housing were predicated on Afro-Americans' ability to demonstrate that they could be efficient workers, responsible tenants, and virtuous citizens. This approach led the League to identify the "better classes" of blacks—defined as such by their embrace of middle-class values as well as their economic standing—as the vanguard of collective uplift. As a result, not only did the League's housing and employment programs

emphasize the importance of finding homes and jobs for the so-called talented tenth, but its efforts to elevate the material conditions of blacks in Chicago and New York frequently included projects intended to insulate middle-class Afro-Americans from their benighted brethren.

The Urban League's perception of the Afro-American lower classes—comprised largely of migrants and poor blacks generally—as disorganized likewise reflected black elites' class concerns. Whites' tendency to judge the race as a whole by the deficiencies of unacculturated Afro-Americans prompted Leaguers to pursue remedial as well as punitive programs directed toward so-called maladjusted blacks. League policies vis-à-vis migrants and poor Afro-Americans thus oscillated between attempts to reorganize their communal institutions in accordance with the dictates of the industrial city and efforts to assist employers and landlords in weeding out those who failed to make the grade. Accepting the social and economic order of the industrial city, the Urban League set out to ensure mutually beneficial contact between the races. This approach ultimately required the organization to discipline black workers and separate the deserving from the undeserving poor.

Since the League set out to elevate the material condition of Afro-Americans, the group's uplift projects were nothing if not dynamic. Indeed, League affiliates generally tailored their particular housing and employment programs to the moment. Locals, moreover, had a fair amount of latitude to shape their own policies. My discussion of the Urban League's work is therefore structured around specific ideological and material concerns.

Chapter 1 examines the Urban League's origins and the philosophical influences shaping its project. In addition to exploring the circumstances leading to the creation of the NUL and its branches, this chapter draws connections between the League and the Chicago School of Sociology. While the discussion illustrates personnel links between the Chicago School and the National, New York, and Chicago Urban Leagues, the chapter's primary aim is to establish the appeal and relevance of Chicago School models of assimilation to Urban Leaguers.

From there the project's focus shifts to the League's housing, employment, and union activities. Because the New Deal and World War II altered certain aspects of the Urban League's approach, the book's analysis of the organization's goals and projects consists of two sections that take the New Deal as the dividing point. Thus Chapters 2 through 4 look at the League's work between 1910 and 1932, while Chapters 5, 6, and 7 focus on the period from 1933 to 1950. I have chosen to conclude the study in 1950 with the Urban League's Pilot Placement Program, initiated by the National and New York Urban Leagues between 1947 and 1948 and the Chicago League in 1950.¹⁷

Chapter 2 examines the League's housing and community development programs from the group's inception to the New Deal. This chapter explores the implications of the Urban League's identification of maladjustment as a major source of housing and neighborhood decay. The chapter also considers the tensions stemming from the League's efforts to secure better housing for black tenants, devoting particular attention to the difficulty the Urban League experienced meeting the needs of both benefactors and beneficiaries.

Chapter 3 focuses on the employment, job placement, and training programs of the Urban Leagues of Chicago and New York. It demonstrates that the League's emphasis on workplace competence as an engine of economic uplift frequently led it to propose and even manage programs that were of greater benefit to employers than employees. It also contends that Leaguers viewed vocational training as a means of both enhancing Afro-Americans' human capital and providing constructive outlets for restless minds.

Chapter 4 considers the multiple factors undergirding the League's interest in organized labor in the years before the New Deal. Though many Leaguers viewed participation in the union movement as a vehicle for improving blacks' economic status, they also perceived unionization as a means of combating social disorganization while easing racial tensions. Afro-American involvement in mainstream labor unions, Leaguers hoped, would provide alternatives to radical politics and create mutual empathy between the races.

Chapters 5 through 7 examine the impact of the New Deal, World War II, and the postwar downturn on League programs. Since perpetually high rates of black joblessness ensured that Urban Leaguers in this period were far more invested in employment issues than they were in housing, this section of the book begins with a look at the social-work group's job placement, vocational training, and union policies between 1933 and 1950. My account of the League's employment efforts devotes special attention to the influence of the interventionist state and global war over the Urban League's work in this regard. Chapter 5, therefore, focuses on the Urban League's jobs and union initiatives throughout the era of the New Deal, while Chapter 6 explores these efforts during World War II and its immediate aftermath. Chapter 7 wraps up this section with an analysis of the impact of the burgeoning welfare state on the Urban League's housing and neighborhood projects.

Between the 1930s and 1940s, League policy shifted significantly not only as the group's officials embraced federal intervention in the nation's economy but also as many adopted a greater political militancy. Leaguers would also devote more attention to structural sources of inequality. Nevertheless, the Urban League's housing, employment, and union activities continued to be shaped by many of the same class biases influencing its activities in the earlier

period. Leaguers remained invested in efforts to mitigate the deleterious effects of social disorganization in order to ensure harmonious interaction between the races. As a result, League housing policy, which emphasized the importance of integration as well as public housing and thereby marked a major shift, continued to stress the need to insulate the better classes of Afro-Americans from unacculturated blacks. The Urban League's employment activities in this period likewise stressed the importance of elevating the status of the better classes. Indeed, the expansion of the welfare state actually allowed the League to devote even greater attention to making job placements for the talented tenth. Leaguers, moreover, maintained their perception of unionization and job training programs as vehicles through which to combat social disorganization.