INTRODUCTION

One Kind of Freedom Revisited

Anthony Patrick O’Brien and William G. Shade

Lehigh University

The articles published in this special issue of Explorations in Economic History originated as papers presented at a three-day conference, “One Kind of Freedom Reconsidered: African-American Economic Life in the Segregation Era,” that was held at Lehigh University September 17–19, 1999. With more than 20 years having passed since Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch published One Kind of Freedom, it seemed an appropriate time to hold a conference that would bring together interested scholars in order both to reassess that book’s conclusions and to discuss further research on related themes. We were interested both in evaluating the work of Ransom and Sutch in relation to more recent scholarship and in extending the sophisticated, quantitative, and theoretically informed examination of black economic life beyond the postbellum South that had been the focus of Ransom and Sutch’s original work. Thus a number of the papers carry the story forward as the African-American population migrated from the rural agricultural South into the urbanized and industrialized North.

Twenty-five years ago the research of economists into the history of African Americans was confined almost entirely to the study of slavery. The publication of One Kind of Freedom in 1977 represented a new departure. Based on extensive collections of new data, Ransom and Sutch persuasively demonstrated that “the economic institutions established in the postemancipation era effectively operated to keep the black population a landless agricultural labor force, operating tenant farms with backward and unprogressive technology. What little income was generated in excess of the bare essentials of life was exploited by monopolistic credit merchants.” But they went beyond this picture of the evils of sharecropping to insist as well that “the result of the economic advancements achieved by blacks since World War I is not, as we know all too well today, parity with whites. The progress made to date has been painfully slow…. The kind of freedom permitted black Americans today is still incomplete” (pp. 198–199).

Immediately on publication, One Kind of Freedom set off a lively debate.
Particularly controversial was their argument that many black sharecroppers were in perpetual debt to rural merchants, who insisted that the croppers grow cotton as collateral. According to Ransom and Sutch, the result of this debt “lock-in” was significant overproduction of cotton in the South.\(^1\) In the end, the central message of *One Kind of Freedom* that following Emancipation the South made a rapid transition to a system in which the bulk of the African-American population became sharecroppers and that economic progress was very limited thereafter became the standard or textbook view.\(^2\)

Ransom and Sutch originally collected data on 11,202 farms in the 11 Confederate States as part of the research underlying *One Kind of Freedom*. The computer technology available to them in the 1970s made analyzing the entire data set prohibitively costly and time consuming, so they confined their analysis to 4,695 farms in the Cotton South. For their current paper, Ransom and Sutch extended their analysis to the full 11,202-farm sample, and although they found some variance across regions, they reaffirmed their main conclusions with respect to black farm ownership, labor force participation rates, and a number of other issues. On the key questions of “lock-in” and overproduction of cotton, applying modern regression techniques to a slightly different sample of farms from the Cotton South than was used in *One Kind of Freedom*, they confirmed their conclusion that a large proportion of small farms operated by blacks were locked into producing cotton by rural merchants who represented the only available source of credit. The result was that the South overproduced cotton and drove down its value to the detriment of long-run income growth.

The highlight of the Lehigh conference was the roundtable discussion of this paper by Peter Coclanis, Stanley Engerman, Harold Woodman, and Gavin Wright and the response by Ransom and Sutch. Formal versions of the roundtable comments are presented here. Taken together, these comments lay out most of the important questions that were raised by the original book and that continue to occupy economists and economic historians.

Because the manuscript census of agriculture for 1880 provided detailed information on farm operators, there was a tendency in *One Kind of Freedom* and subsequent work by other authors to emphasize the experience of sharecroppers as central to the economic experience of blacks in the rural South. More recent scholarship has made it evident that the transition to family farming was slower than Ransom and Sutch originally thought. A large proportion of African Americans were still farm laborers in 1880 (Irwin, 1990; McKenzie, 1994; Irwin and O’Brien, 1998). In their conference paper, James Irwin and Anthony Patrick O’Brien argue that African Americans living in the Mississippi Delta experienced considerable income growth between 1880 and the eve of World War I. Nearly half of this income growth was attributable to the movement of African Americans up the agricultural ladder from laborers to farm operators. Although

\(^1\) See the essays in Walton and Shepherd (1981).

Irwin and O’Brien show that black incomes did not stagnate, even 50 years after Emancipation African Americans remained desperately poor compared with other Americans.

Economists are generally inclined to argue that market forces should work to undermine discrimination (Becker, 1971). Some scholars have questioned, however, if such forces were sufficiently strong to overcome the racial caste system of the postbellum South (Wright, 1986). Some have even questioned whether the rural South had an operating labor market. In their essay, Lee Alston and Kyle Kauffman rely on plantation-level data collected by Robert Brooks in 1911 to argue that the southern agricultural labor market was in fact competitive and that black and white sharecroppers received equal pay.

A number of other previously neglected themes in African-American economic history have recently received attention and are represented in these essays. Although some work has been done on property accumulation by blacks in the South (Schweninger, 1990), other aspects of black wealth accumulation have gone unexplored. Here William Collins and Robert Margo use census data to study trends in black home ownership between 1900 and 1990. They find that the gap between the rates of white and black home ownership did close, but that most of this change has taken place since 1960. Fair housing legislation since the 1960s appears to have had little impact on closing the racial gap in home ownership.

The general question of the impact of federal government policies on the economic well-being of African Americans remains to be explored. Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal is usually given credit for having shifted blacks away from their traditional loyalty to the Republican Party and into the Democratic coalition, where today they are the most Democratic of any social group. But whether New Deal programs had a significant economic impact on blacks is not clear. To the degree that these programs helped the poor, they must have affected blacks as the most poor social group. Some New Deal agencies tolerated segregation, however, and it was almost impossible, particularly in the late 1930s, to get any legislation directly benefitting African Americans through a Congress in which white southern, conservative, Democrats played such a major role. Price Fishback, Michael Haines, and Shawn Kantor provide evidence in their essay that New Deal legislation may have helped to lower black infant mortality in the South. They identify the Farm Credit Administration’s drought relief and emergency crop loan programs, housing loans from the Home Owners Loan Corporation, and spending by the Public Building Administration as being associated with reductions in black infant mortality at the county level. They conclude that “during the New Deal federal programs appear to have been a positive force in counteracting the unequal policies practiced by many state and local governments.”

The most important event in early 20th-century African-American economic history was the migration to the North. This migration is generally thought to have resulted from “push” factors, such as the arrival of the boll weevil, the
passage of Jim Crow laws, the epidemic of lynching that began at the turn of the century, and the development of the mechanical cotton harvester, and “pull” factors, principally the increase in demand for industrial labor during World Wars I and II. In his essay, Thomas Maloney examines the labor market experiences of black migrants in Cincinnati, Ohio, during the years immediately after World War I, using data from Selective Service registration records and the manuscript population schedules for the 1920 Census. According to this evidence, in the brief period from 1917 to 1920, between 15 and 20% of black men moved out of unskilled and service jobs and into semiskilled, skilled, and white collar jobs. This is less upward movement than whites experienced, but it exceeds the occupational gains calculated over 10-year intervals in similar studies of blacks in the urban south in the late 1800s. Moreover, southern-born blacks were about as likely as northern-born blacks to move into better occupations during these years. There is evidence that would indicate that African Americans in Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh enjoyed similar mobility.

As African Americans moved North and into nonagricultural employment their incomes improved, but they became more vulnerable to the vagaries of the business cycle. Certainly the Great Depression hit the relatively new migrants harder than anyone else. William Sundstrom provides a striking example of this by presenting evidence that the labor force participation rate of black women fell between 1930 and 1940, whereas the labor force participation rate of white women rose during the same period. African American women had traditionally had the highest rate of employment among women—significantly higher than whites. Unemployment of white men forced more white women than ever to seek jobs. Apparently because of racial discrimination in layoff decisions, black women suffered a higher incidence of unemployment than did white women. Because of their high unemployment rates, many black women became discouraged about their job prospects and dropped out of the labor force. Women had been contributing a greater fraction of family income in black families than in white families, so the incomes of black families were significantly affected by this decline in the labor force participation of women.

Among other things, One Kind of Freedom emphasized the economic importance of racism in the post-Emancipation years. African Americans continue to lag behind other Americans economically. The role that racism plays in explaining this fact is an emotional subject, as can be seen in the debate over the work of William Julius Wilson (1996). There are no easy answers to the continuing economic plight of African Americans, but these essays help put the problem into a firm historical context that can inform future policy makers. To repeat a statement that Ransom and Sutch made in 1977, today’s economy does have a vibrant black middle class and more blacks than ever are graduating from college, yet the freedoms and opportunities of African Americans today are “still incomplete.”
REFERENCES


