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"The Race was on Trial"—Migrant Adjustment in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh During the Great Migration

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Abstract

This essay provides the first comparison of the political economic thought of Sadie T.M. Alexander and Abram Harris Jr., the first Black American economists, through an analysis of Alexander's dissertation and Harris' master's thesis. Alexander and Harris studied the Great Migration of Black Americans from the South to northward destinations while the early migration was unfolding. Reflecting the anxieties of northern Black residents, Alexander and Harris' research explored the racial implications of migration on Black communities in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, respectively, through an analysis of migrants' ability to adjust to their new urban environments. I examine Alexander and Harris' understanding of migrant adjustment, their methods for analyzing adjustment, and their recommendations for facilitating migrants' adjustment to northern industrial economies. Alexander and Harris' analyses of the Great Migration differed from later generations of mostly White economists in ways that can inform directions for future research on the migration.

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Introduction

In his survey of the economic literature on the Great Migration, William Collins (2021, 5) states that the literature reflects the underrepresentation of Black economists and notes that African American historian Carter Woodson's 1918 study of Black American migrants focused on themes that recent generations of economists have taken up. Collins also notes that the Great Migration "unfolded with comparatively little contemporaneous attention in the leading economics journals" and speculates that a more diverse economics profession would have examined the issues differently and with greater continuity over time (ibid.). Indeed, Collins' assessment provides an entry point for examining the Great Migration studies by the first two African American economists, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander and Abram Harris Jr. Both Alexander and Harris devoted contemporaneous attention to the Great Migration through their graduate research on African American migrants during the early migration period.

As the migration got underway, it generated substantial scholarly analysis by Black and White researchers. Early scholars of the migration analyzed it through a race relations framework that emphasized problems resulting from Black migration to urban industrial areas, including an increase in racial tensions and hostility (Joe William Trotter Jr. 1991). White residents often reacted to the growth of the Black population in northern and midwestern cities with racial violence in order to confine Black Americans to particular parts of the city. Prominent studies of the early migration by Black scholars include the research of George Haynes (1919), Charles Johnson (1922), Emmett Scott (1920), and Woodson (1918). According to Francille Wilson (2006, 118-119), these Black male social scientists seized on the uncertainty of the Great Migration as it was unfolding as a way to redefine the "Negro problem" into measurable social and economic indicators that they could use to guide reforms. The research of Sadie Alexander, the only African American woman at the time with doctoral training in a social science field, and Abram Harris were within this tradition.[1] Each defined the problems Black migrants encountered in receiving cities in Pennsylvania and each provided recommendations for reforms that they believed would benefit the migrants.

Despite Alexander and Harris' graduate training in economics, their analyses differed from other pre- and post-war studies of the migration that emphasized economic factors as the driving force from the South and into the North. Those studies maintained that depressed wages pushed African-Americans out of the South and the lure of higher wages pulled them into the North. Trotter (1991, 7) critiques migration studies that emphasized push-pull economic factors because he argues that they gave primacy to external factors in driving the migration while depicting Black migrants as giving little thought to the migration as they were swept up with "migration fever". Alexander and Harris, however, described Black migrants as active agents in determining how to manage household budgets and in navigating their new social environments, respectively. They also devoted attention to issues internal to the Black community through their discussions of social relations between the migrants and Black residents living in cities where they relocated. For longtime Black residents, a primary concern was how to ensure the adjustment of southern migrants into their new environments.

This essay examines the ways in which Alexander and Harris understood the issue of migrant adjustment by reviewing their graduate research on Black migration from the South to cities in Pennsylvania. I examine how each defined the problem of migrant adjustment, the methods each used to analyze migrant adjustment, and their recommendations for facilitating the adjustment process. The first section of this essay provides an overview of the Great Migration. The next two sections summarize Sadie Alexander's dissertation and Abram Harris, Jr.'s master's thesis on the adjustment process for Black American migrants. I conclude with

[1] According to Wilson (2002, 169), Sadie Alexander was the only African American woman with a doctorate degree in a social science field for over a dozen years after she obtained it in 1921.

thoughts on how their research differs from current research on the Great Migration and how it can inform future research in economics.

Black Americans and the Great Migration

The Great Migration of southern African Americans to northward destinations was one of the largest voluntary, internal migrations in US history. From 1916 to the early 1970s, six million Black Americans migrated from southern states to the North, Midwest, and West. If we use data that includes return migrants and mortality rates within each decade rather than the more conventional end of decade estimates, the number of Black migrants is closer to eight million throughout the twentieth century (James N. Gregory 2005, 14).

The Great Migration took place over two large waves: the first wave of 1.5 million migrants, initiated by demand for labor during World War I, occurred from 1916 to 1930 and the second wave lasted from 1940 to 1970. This essay examines the research of Alexander and Harris during the first migration wave. The peak years of the first wave were 1916-1919 and 1924-1925 due to the war and to restrictive immigration laws (Darlene Clark Hine 1991; Jacqueline Jones 1985). The economic downturn in the post-war period led to a brief decrease in Black migration between these peak years.

From an economic standpoint, the early migration stands out as the beginning of the transformation of African Americans from peasant, agricultural workers into an industrial, wage-laboring population (Banks 2006). With migration, Black Americans became increasingly located in urban and northern communities. According to Peter Gottlieb (1987), one of the defining characteristics of the first Great Migration wave was the increased awareness by migrants that the movement was the beginning of a new historical period for Black Americans. Though they had very little money, African Americans sustained the migration by relying on a network of family and friends in source and destination areas so that they could flee from horrible conditions in the South that included disfranchisement, Jim Crow segregation, low earnings, and racial terror in favor of better conditions and opportunities in the North.

Black scholars such as Alexander and Harris analyzed the migration through a race relations perspective that examined its effect on racial tensions between Whites and Blacks while also addressing the migration’s impact on intra-racial tensions between migrants and Black residents who were already living in northern urban communities and were wary of the Black newcomers who moved there. Their research reflected the perspectives of Black residents in northern cities who anticipated that local Whites would judge Black Americans collectively based on the behavior of the southern migrants.

The critical question for longstanding Black residents was the degree to which migrants could make the adjustment: could southern migrants adapt to northern urban communities and, if so, what programs would ensure their adjustment. Longtime Black residents created programs to assist migrants and facilitate adjustment because they believed that southern migrants from rural areas were often maladjusted to the demands of life in northern, industrial cities. They were also fearful that the migration would lead to White racial terror against the Black community. White hostility during the migration was also aroused by their belief that migrants were spreading epidemic diseases into White neighborhoods (Louise V. Kennedy 1930).

Given their concerns over white animosity, Black residents also monitored the behavior of migrants in order to shape their behavior to residents’ expectations of proper decorum (Banks 2006). The Pittsburgh Urban League, for example, printed calendars for migrants with suggestions for “the benefit of the Negro in Pittsburgh”. They instructed migrants to keep homes clean, maintain steady employment, keep prejudice down by being quiet in public places, send children to school clean, and attend church service in order to “win the respect

of your community and make the community better for Yourself, Your Race and Your Country" (Banks 2006, 198). Although Alexander and Harris used different methods for analyzing the migration experience, they each gave credence to the view that White perceptions of migrants would shape the general image and treatment of Black Americans. As such, the primary issue that each addressed was the degree to which migrants were adjusting to northern industrial life and the factors that impeded their adjustment. Both viewed racial discrimination as an impediment to migrants' adjustment and made recommendations to decrease discriminatory practices.

Sadie Alexander's Analysis of Black Migrants

Sadie Tanner Mossell was born in 1898 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her class position as a member of two prominent African American families in the city shaped her analysis of Black migration to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Mossell (hereafter "Alexander") attended the University of Pennsylvania for undergraduate and graduate degrees. Alexander received a B.S. degree in education in 1918 and a Master's degree in economics in 1919. In 1921, Alexander became the first African American to receive the doctorate degree in economics. She obtained a law degree in 1927 because of her inability to gain employment as an economist.

During the period when Alexander was a graduate student, White racial violence against Black Americans increased within Philadelphia and across the nation. On July 26, 1918, as Alexander was about to begin her master's program, a White mob descended on the home of a Black woman probation officer who had moved into a White neighborhood in South Philadelphia (Vincent P. Franklin 1975). The violence against African Americans in Philadelphia lasted for four days. The Philadelphia attacks preceded the "Red Summer", a national surge in White mob violence against African Americans during 1919, the year when Alexander began her doctoral program.

For her dissertation research, Alexander focused on the substantial number of Black southerners who had migrated to Philadelphia from 1916 to 1918.[2] According to Alexander, ten percent of the 400,000 Black Americans who left the South beginning in 1916 relocated to Philadelphia after agents from Pennsylvania and Erie railroads recruited them (Mossell 1921, 6). Alexander found that Philadelphia industries did not actively have to recruit Black workers to the city since migrants often left the railroads that had recruited them in favor of higher paid jobs in the industrial sector.

Alexander's 1921 dissertation, *The Standard of Living Among One Hundred Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia*, was a case study of Black migrants in the 29th Ward of Philadelphia. The ward had been mostly White prior to the migration but became majority Black by the time she began her dissertation. Migrants hailed from rural areas of the Deep South, including South Carolina, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. Alexander conducted field research from October through December 1919 by interviewing 100 Black migrant families in their homes, believing that their shared race enabled her to meet with migrants on a more intimate basis than had she been White (p. 12). Recently published migration studies by Emmett Scott (1920), Carter Woodson (1918), and the US Department of Labor, Division of Negro Economics (1919) informed Alexander's analysis. Alexander's research addressed two main questions that the large influx of migrants posed for the city of Philadelphia: their ability to adapt to the industrial economy and their impact on race relations, stating (Mossell 1921, 10):

[2] See also Julianne Malveaux's detailed analysis of Sadie Mossell's dissertation (Malveaux 1991). Malveaux discusses the dissertation within the context of Alexander's inability to have a career as an economist.

> Was the migrant to Philadelphia able to adapt himself to the environment of an industrial economy, and did his presence help or hinder the racial condition in that city? Believing that the standard of living maintained by a people is an index of the extent to which they have adapted themselves to a given environment, we have undertaken to analyze the incomes and expenditures of a group of migrant families in order to ascertain the character of their standards of living and thereby to judge of the degree of adaptation obtained by them.

As this quote attests, Alexander assessed migrants’ adjustment to the city’s industrial economy by a single indicator, their ability to earn a fair standard of living. The “fair standard of living” that Alexander calculated referred to the income that would enable migrant families of varying sizes to meet the cost of living in Philadelphia. After she estimated the income that migrants needed in order to earn a fair standard of living, she compared their family budgets against it. She collected extensive data on household living expenses, number of workers, earnings, debts, and savings. In order to verify migrants’ responses, Alexander examined various records including sales receipts, bank statements, and credit purchases.

Alexander’s results indicated that a five-person family could achieve a fair standard of living if the head of the family earned $6.10 a day for 300 working days or $1829.48 per year. She found that the majority of families, 64 percent, were able to meet this standard with their combined earnings and 41 percent could do so with the earnings of the father alone. She regarded these percentages as high and an indication that although migrants had come primarily from agricultural areas, they were able to earn sufficient wages in the industrial economy (p. 46). As such, Alexander’s results may have allayed concerns that Black migrants would become dependent on the city for economic support. Importantly, she based her analysis of migrant adjustment on the premise that migrants should earn a living wage.

Alexander’s second question—the impact of migration on racial conditions in Philadelphia—focused on longtime White and Black residents’ reaction to the migrants. In answering this question, Alexander provided a descriptive analysis of migrants’ standard of living beyond her calculations of migrants’ income and expenditures. She observed that White resentment was already leading to an increase in racial segregation in the city’s schools, churches, and theatres. The most pressing problem that migrants faced, however, was inadequate housing. Black migrants faced an acute housing shortage because the city had recruited large numbers of migrants but had not provided sufficient housing for them. Housing conditions were so poor that Alexander characterized them as “deplorable” because the railroads housed men in box cars and tents while migrant workers in the city were “herded together like cattle … [in] one room measuring 16 by 20 feet in which twenty men slept on the floor” (p. 7). In addition to congested living quarters, Alexander described the high rents property owners charged for properties that were in disrepair. While interviewing migrants about their family budgets, she also observed the condition of their homes and recounted her notes in her dissertation:

> Plaster falling in nearly every room. Floor boards broken… Boxes placed over holes in the floor ... I nearly fell into a cellar ... Wall paper torn off in the hall ... Wall paper falling from ceiling and walls in four of the five rooms. House does not look as if it had been painted inside, nor outside, since being built … Toilet drainage out of repair … Water has to be poured down hopper by the bucket … Underground leakage that keeps water from the toilet in the yard. Odor from toilet is vile … Water supply too weak to flush the hopper well ... Chimney must need cleaning out, as the stoves do not draw well. So much smoke in the house that I thought it must be on fire … It never rains but it pours into this house. The roof must leak all over (p. 26).

Alexander provided other examples of unsanitary living conditions brought about by property owners' absence, neglect, and greed and she attributed the housing shortage to inadequate housing stock as well as White people's efforts to confine migrants.

Philadelphia's Black organizations responded to the migration through efforts to assist migrants with their adjustment. Alexander favorably discussed a number of these efforts. The Philadelphia Housing Association and local Black churches, for example, formed committees to help migrant workers secure better housing. Black physicians, dentists, and pharmacists—part of the Philadelphia Academy of Medicine—attempted to address migrants' housing, medical, and sanitation needs (p. 8). The city's Black ministers, working through the auspices of the Interdenominational Ministerial Union, developed plans to assist migrants by operating soup kitchens, enrolling children in Sunday school, and providing coal during winter months (p. 8). Alexander's description of these organizations' adjustment efforts revealed that the purpose was more than just an attempt to provide needed services to migrants (Mossell 1921, 8):

> They urged him to send his children to school, to take advantage of the libraries and night schools, himself, to give the best service to his employer regardless of pay, and above all to remember that in him the race was on trial; for now he was given a chance to work at a living wage, to buy a home, save money and become an active part of Philadelphia's citizenry. The entire country was watching to see what advantage he would take of this opportunity.

As this quote indicates, Black American civic and religious associations wanted to ensure that migrants represented Black people in a favorable light since they believed that "the race was on trial" as a new industrial working class. They hoped that the large-scale entry of Black workers into the industrial economy would lead to greater economic opportunities for Black Americans.

Alexander recognized that these efforts at racial uplift were also an outcome of intra-racial fears and resentments from the city's earlier Black residents. In reference to the July 1918 mob violence, she stated:

> This incident explains the attitude of the Negro public of Philadelphia toward the coming of the migrant. As in the case of the probation officer so in numerous other occurrences, the colored people of every class received harsh treatment at the hands of the white public. This was virtually unknown to the Philadelphia Negro, for the city had long possessed a relatively small population of Negroes of culture, education and some financial means. They had always enjoyed the same social and educational facilities as the whites and courteous treatment from them. But, with the increase in population by a group of generally uneducated and untrained persons, these privileges were withdrawn as has already been discussed. The old colored citizens of Philadelphia resented this, placed the blame at the migrant's door and stood aloof from him (p. 9).

Although Alexander believed that Black resentment was largely misplaced, she added that Black migrants were not without blame in the matter since some were:

> Lounging on street corners, frequenting dens of vice and saloons and arming themselves with razors and pistols thereby increasing the number of court cases and greatly marring the records of the Negroes in Philadelphia and the peace of the city. Although the numbers indulging in these practices may have

> composed only a small percentage of the total migrants, in such cases the action of the few condemned all (p. 9).

The benefits that Alexander received from her social class position influenced her perception of the absence of racial discrimination in Philadelphia prior to southern migration and her assessment of migrants’ errant behavior. However, it did not prevent her from acknowledging Black Philadelphians’ resentment towards the migrants or the overall, long-term potential benefits of migration for Black Americans.

Alexander’s conclusion made it clear that while she thought that the arrival of southern migrants had created disadvantages for earlier Black residents, the overall impact of the migration would be beneficial for them as well as for Black Americans more generally in the long-run. She believed that southern migrants had stifled the progress made by the earlier Black residents of Philadelphia since migrants were “generally void of culture” because they lacked formal education whereas old Black Philadelphians had already achieved “high economic, intellectual, and moral status” (p. 48). She was optimistic that overtime, however, as migrants gained more education and White hostility decreased, Black life in Philadelphia would return to as it was prior to the migration. As such, Alexander maintained that a few years of “slowed progress” for Black Philadelphians paled in comparison to the future gains made by rural southern migrants in education and culture (p. 48). Although Alexander’s social class position influenced her perception of culture, she viewed migrants’ shortcomings as resulting from prior deprivations that they could overcome with educational opportunities in Philadelphia.

Alexander’s policy recommendations called for the eradication of what she viewed as the three main impediments to migrants achieving a fair standard of living. These included 1) decreasing the large number of children in many migrant families since she found that families with the largest number of children were the least likely to achieve the fair standard, 2) decreasing ignorance tied to unwise spending on housing or fuel or insurance, and 3) diminishing racial prejudice.[3] She recommended that Black churches provide instruction to migrants on various spending categories and build housing for migrants rather than large additions to their churches. Alexander believed that Black business owners had a unique opportunity to assist migrants by providing recreation, insurance, and housing and by paying them a living wage. She also stated that the Philadelphia municipality had an obligation to ensure that adequate housing was available for its inhabitants for their sake as well as for public health. These recommendations were also an attempt to lessen the burdens imposed on native Black Philadelphians by “alleviating and improving the position in which the migrant’s coming has placed the colored inhabitants of Philadelphia” (p. 48).

Abram Harris, Jr. and the Problems of Black Migration

Abram Harris, Jr. was born in 1899 in Richmond Virginia. His father was a butcher and his mother a schoolteacher. Harris received a B.S. degree in 1922 from Virginia Union University. After graduation, he worked in New York City for the National Urban League’s Department of Research and Investigation and helped Charles S. Johnson set up the League’s *Opportunity* Magazine (Wilson 2006, 149). Harris received a fellowship from the National Urban League and the University of Pittsburgh from 1923-24 to study economics at the university.[4] He earned a master’s degree in economics from the University of Pittsburgh in 1924 and then taught for a year at West Virginia State University. From 1925-26, he worked as Executive Secretary of

[3] Alexander’s list of suggestions for overcoming the impediments for achieving a fair standard of living was not a ranking of their relative importance.

[4] Alexander, Sadie. T.M. 1949. Correspondence to Mr. Eugene Kinckle Jones, Executive Secretary, National Urban League, September 16, 1949. STMA Box 60 FF 12.

the Minneapolis Urban League. Harris then returned to school and obtained a doctorate in economics from Columbia University in 1930, becoming the second Black American to receive the Ph.D. in economics. According to William Darity Jr. (1997) Harris became the first Black American economist to gain academic prominence in the US.

Harris' 1924 master's thesis, The *New Negro Worker in Pittsburgh,* addressed the problems of migration six years after Abraham Epstein (1918) published his detailed study of Black migrants to Pittsburgh during the 1916-17 period. Unlike Alexander, Harris had the benefit of studying migration several years into it and this enabled him to appreciate the historical significance of the migration, calling it perhaps the largest "mass migration of a single folk in history" (1924, 1). Harris' study exemplified the notion that Black migration created problems since the aim of his study was the examination of the industrial, civic, and social problems of Black workers—problems that he said were "accentuated" by the migration of Black Americans from the South (p. 1). Because of Harris' emphasis on the problems associated with migration, he said that he chose not to examine the economic implications of the migration but, instead, to investigate the "handicaps and maladjustments" caused by the rapid change in Black community life due to migration (p. 4). Migrant adjustment, therefore, was the focus of his analysis and it reflected concerns of local Black residents since they had already established eleven associations that sought migrant social adjustment (Harris 1924). Harris viewed the problem of migrant adjustment as both an outcome of their prior living conditions in the South as well as their residential concentration in the North.

Pennsylvania was the first state that recruited and transported large numbers of Black migrants from the South (Scott 1920). Pittsburgh, situated in Allegheny County Pennsylvania, was one of the earliest industrial centers in the US. The area attracted Black migrants because of the high demand for workers in its steel mills and because it was the gateway to Ohio and other mid-western states. During World War I, Pittsburgh's demand for Black labor stemmed from increased demand for munitions by the US government and war allies.

From Harris' standpoint, the dramatic growth of the Black population in Pittsburgh relative to that of Whites brought about problems based on migrants' geographic concentration. The Black population in Allegheny County increased 62.2 percent from 1910-1920, bringing the population of Black Americans to 4.5 percent compared to 3.4 percent in 1910 (p. 7). Although the White proportion was higher than the Black proportion, Harris indicated that the White population had only increased by 13.1 percent over the same period.[5] Additionally, 70 percent of the Black population in Allegheny County was concentrated in the city of Pittsburgh. According to Harris, the concentration of migrants into a few industrial districts such as Pittsburgh created problems for Black residents because it increased racial suspicions and contributed to various "housing, health, vice and crime problems" (p. 4).

As with Philadelphia, migration exacerbated the shortage of housing that previously existed in Pittsburgh since the city had not made plans to create new housing. Harris described abysmal living conditions for migrants who worked at 13 plants in the Pittsburgh district and were placed in boarding houses, camps and bunkhouses. In bunkhouses, as many as 50 men slept on cots in an open room that lacked any semblance of home life. Migrants' housing problems included overcrowding, inadequate ventilation, lack of privacy, theft of personal items, and lack of recreational outlets that gave rise to "gambling and trafficking in bootleg liquor with resultant brawls, shootings, cuttings, and murders" (pp. 13-14). Harris thought that awful boarding conditions and lack of recreational facilities led men to seek out prostitutes, drugs, and illegal alcohol. Moreover, housing conditions were so depressing that some men committed suicide, as in the case of two men from the same company's barracks who killed themselves within three days of each other in 1925 (p. 14).

[5] In 1910, the Black population in Allegheny County was 34,217 and increased to 53,517 in 1920 compared to an increase in the White population from 983,843 in 1910 to 1,131,762 in 1920.

Living conditions for migrant families were also unsanitary and contributed to poor health. Harris discussed the difficulty wives had in keeping homes clean as well as the physical condition of housing. Homes often lacked indoor sewage connections, had no lighting or water systems, and had little ventilation and yet property owners charged high rents. Harris criticized Pittsburgh city government for permitting rental properties that violated city codes. He stated that “disease, vice, delinquency and crime” would continue until affordable modern private homes were built to accommodate the newcomers (p. 19).

One of the main indicators that Harris used to assess migrants’ adjustment was their morbidity and mortality rates. He believed that migrants’ higher rates showed that they were “maladjusted” to life in Pittsburgh. The Black population in Pittsburgh had higher rates of death from infectious diseases such as whooping cough and diphtheria compared to Whites and Black people were more likely than Whites were to develop pulmonary diseases such as pneumonia (p. 20). In 1919, for example, Black people constituted 11 percent of pneumonia deaths in Pittsburgh although they were just 6 percent of the population (p. 20). Harris attributed higher death rates for various pulmonary diseases such as influenza to migrants’ lack of familiarity with the disease symptoms as well as their not being accustomed to having access to physicians and hospital care (p. 20). In 1920, Pittsburgh migrants had an excess of births over deaths and Harris viewed this was an indication that they were gradually adjusting to their new environment. He regarded it as the outcome of stable family life on migrants as more women migrated to the city and to the effectiveness of health campaigns by local organizations such as the Urban League (p. 23).

Harris also assessed migrants’ maladjustment according to their criminal activity. In his section on “Crime, Delinquency, and Dependency”, Harris included extensive data on arrests rates by race in 1923 compiled by Dorothy Lowman, a social work student at Carnegie Institute of Technology. By the end of that year, nearly 14 percent of 26,476 police arrests were of Black offenders compared to 86.2 percent White offenders. Offenses included felonies such as murder and cutting, theft, assault and battery, trespassing, gambling, disorderly conduct, drunkenness, suspicious conduct (including vagrancy and “suspicious person”), sex offenses (including adultery and prostitution), and violation of liquor laws (pp. 29-30). Police were more likely to arrest Black people than Whites in Pittsburgh for suspicious conduct and Harris noted that when a crime was committed, the police combed through Black communities and made arrests of people they believed were suspicious. If police found guns in Black people’s possession, they charged them with threats of violence (p. 33). Harris reasoned, however, that Black Americans in the South had little confidence in the courts to provide justice and often relied on settling disputes with “personal combat”. Black migrants, therefore, did not trust courts so they purchased weapons for protection.

Harris (1924, 35) explained migrants’ higher arrest rates by also incorporating prevailing biological explanations of behavior and notions of rural southern Black Americans as backwards by claiming that migrant offenders were often “feebleminded”. Feebleminded migrants, he believed, were even less prepared than other Black migrants were for the complex demands of industrial life:

> These victims of fate can hardly be said to possess the ingenuity of a liar; rather their dejected countenances, blank stare, general slovenliness and slobbering mouths confirm the findings of the tests which assign them to the category of feeble-mindedness ... The exigencies of the economic order have thrown these feebleminded people along with their more virile kinsmen into the midst of an intricate community life where many persons who are more nearly normal find it difficult to adjust themselves.

Migrants who were brought before the courts would likely end up in a state penitentiary, a county workhouse, or a home for children. By the end of 1923, Black migrants had higher rates of incarceration and confinement to workhouses compared to Whites: there were 455 Black prisoners and 393 White prisoners in the Allegheny County Work House (p. 37). Harris reported that the majority of Black people committed to city homes and hospitals from 1914-1924 were there due to dependency (p. 38). State and city officials used the term "dependency" to refer to people who they deemed as unable to support themselves (Laura Appleman 2018). For Harris, dependency resulted from poverty, a condition that he believed was a consequence of hereditary and/or environmental factors. While Harris accepted biological explanations for behavior, he also linked behavior to social environment: "from poverty is crime produced and out of crime is poverty born thus the vicious circle. Add illiteracy or general ignorance to poverty and crime and we have a triumvirate which damns men to indecent and anti-social lives" (p. 39).

Despite his own focus on migrants' behavioral characteristics, Harris recognized the tendency on the part of Whites to misperceive economic and social problems as racial. Harris believed that southern migrants' "lack of social ethic, civic pride and refinement" and their "crime, vice and dependency" led to a shift in northern Whites' racial attitudes such that they began implementing racial segregation in restaurants, schools, hotels, and theatres (p. 61). He astutely noted, however, that these problems were not racial attributes unique to Black Americans but that these problems would persist as long as White Americans viewed them as racial and so long as racial isolation between Blacks and Whites continued (p. 61).

Two final sections of Harris' migrant adjustment analysis focused on topics that have been of interest to more recent generations of economists. A number of Pittsburgh employers believed Black workers were unindustrious and, as a result, had high turnover rates but Harris found, after investigating plants with managers who expressed this view, that they had not provided incentives for Black workers to be promoted into positions that were more skilled. Thus, Black workers were likely to have high quit rates in those businesses. Conversely, employers with Black workers in semi and skilled positions had lower turnover rates (p. 45). Harris cited letters written by Black migrants that attested to this relationship governing labor turnover rates. His analysis of Black employee quit rates is consistent with literature on discrimination, job satisfaction, promotion, expectations for promotion, and quit rates (Major G. Coleman, Darity, and Rhonda V. Sharpe, 2008; Arthur Goldsmith, Stanley Sedo, Darity, and Darrick Hamilton, 2004; Vasilios D. Kosteas 2010).

Harris also discussed the performance of migrant schoolchildren, a topic that overlaps with recent interest in the effects of migration on children's wellbeing and neighborhood effects on children's outcomes. He said that the all-White teaching staff in the Pittsburgh school system attributed the "backwardness" of Black students to feeblemindedness rather than restrictions placed upon them in their southern communities of origin: low public expenditures on Black education and shorter school terms in rural areas (p. 56). Additionally, Pittsburgh schools often placed migrant children in classes with students several years younger than they were and Harris believed that the effect of this on their morale was increased rates of truancy and delinquency (p. 59).[6] Harris also noted that, since Black people could not become teachers at the Pittsburgh schools, Black social workers might serve to inspire Black children to excel at school (p. 60).

Harris' overall recommendations were aimed at building interracial cooperation and Black organizational control over problems associated with migrant adjustment. He called on Pittsburgh universities to study the living conditions of migrants in order to increase their

[6] In response to these concerns, the Urban League of Pittsburgh created a Home and School Visitor program for social workers to investigate cases of migrant children who were having problems adjusting to their new school environments.

understanding of Black migrants and of Black life in general (p. 62). Like Alexander, Harris was critical of Black churches in Pittsburgh for raising money to spend on building new edifices rather than on helping migrants to adjust through various direct and indirect expenditures. He viewed organizations such as the Urban League as necessary for addressing local problems and he was critical of Black people in Pittsburgh who failed to contribute sufficient income to civic organizations that promoted Black welfare. Harris concluded his thesis by arguing that Black Americans should gain financial control of organizations that were focused on racial uplift and advancement so that they would be able to have “the final word in deciding the policy and method of organizations where his voice in policy is now limited” (p. 67).

Discussion of Early Black Economists’ Migration Analyses

An analysis of Sadie Alexander and Abram Harris’ graduate research on the Great Migration reveals commonalities and differences. Alexander and Harris studied economics in the early twentieth century when the curriculum was interdisciplinary and often included courses in history and sociology. The influence of their interdisciplinary education is evident in their research because of their incorporation of historical and structural factors affecting migrants. Although Alexander and Harris adhered to the prevailing race relations framework by discussing the migration’s effects on Black-White relations, they also discussed the effects of the migration on relations within the Black community. Both were primarily concerned with migrant adjustment to the industrial economy given the rise in white hostility as Black migration accelerated. They each believed that Black southerners arrived with educational and social deficiencies that hampered their adjustment.

Alexander and Harris used different methods for assessing southern migrants’ adjustment to northern industrial cities. Alexander’s case study focused narrowly on migrants’ ability to earn a living wage as the indicator of their adjustment. She estimated a fair standard of living—a self-sufficiency wage—and then analyzed household budgets for families of different sizes in order to determine the degree to which migrants were able to earn the fair standard of living. Alexander’s study did not lead to the conclusion that migrants were maladjusted to northern city life since the majority of migrants were able to earn sufficient wages in Philadelphia. Unlike Alexander, Harris assessed migrant adjustment broadly by examining data in several categories that included housing, health, crime, employee quit rates, and children’s schooling. Harris regarded southern migrants in Pittsburgh as maladjusted based on the difficulties they encountered in securing adequate housing and on their higher rates for diseases, deaths, crimes, and incarceration. Importantly, although Harris and Alexander recommended both behavioral and policy changes, neither argued that the problems migrants confronted were primarily of their own making. Both economists ultimately linked behavior to social environments, particularly to the detrimental effects of social isolation through residential concentration based on racial discrimination. Harris hoped that as industries spread beyond the city, it would lead to increased decentralization of Black people. Despite migrants’ demand for more housing units, property owners did not produce more housing for them—an outcome that demonstrates the limitations of market-based policies.

This comparison of Alexander and Harris’ graduate research on the Great Migration confirms Collins’ (2021) assertion that early Black economists would likely have examined the issues differently than later generations of mostly White economists. Collins grouped later research on the Great Migration into four main categories: timing of the migration, migrant selection characteristics and implications, migration patterns in source and destination areas, and the migration’s impact on northern cities. Of these, only the fourth category captures the major themes that Alexander and Harris addressed—the migration’s impact in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh respectively. David Cutler, Edward Glaeser, and Jacob Vigdor’s (1999) examination of White responses to Black migration that led to residential segregation is similar

to themes that underlie Alexander and Harris' studies of white reactions to migrants. Ellora Derenoncourt's (2022) analysis of intergenerational mobility could be viewed as a response to Alexander and Harris' speculation that the migration would lead to improved opportunities for Black Americans. Alexander and Harris' research, conducted while the migration was beginning, reflected the primary concerns of Black Americans who were residing in northern cities—how the large, sudden influx of southern migrants would affect their way of life.

The factors motivating Alexander and Harris' studies and the timing of their research are sources of difference between their research and recent analyses of the Great Migration. Collins (2021) notes, for example, that much of the recent migration research developed in response to new and improved data and methods. A main difference between Alexander and Harris' research and recent migration research, therefore, lies in the methods these economists have used for their migration analyses. Alexander and Harris carried out their graduate research when social science methods were becoming more widely used. Alexander conducted field research using a questionnaire that she supplemented with her observations of migrants' home life. She collected primary data that she used in order to answer her research questions. Her statistics were basic enough that her mother was able to check for accuracy (Mossell 1921). Harris' descriptive analysis relied mainly on data gathered by other researchers and he used them to generate additional calculations on which he based his assessments. Both Alexander and Harris combined qualitative methods with descriptive use of numerical data.

In the century that has passed since Alexander and Harris conducted their studies, their research provides vivid, lasting impressions of Black migrant life. Their techniques for data analysis were not prominent features of their research. Unlike current economic research that relies primarily on mathematical models and regression analysis, Alexander and Harris used descriptive data to supplement their analysis of Black migrants. Although Alexander and Harris each used different methods for gathering their data, the richness of their empirical analysis provided detailed information on migrants' living conditions and on the African American communities that engaged them. Their methodologies enabled these early economists to gather ethnographic information on their subjects, including the growth in intra-racial social tensions and the actions taken by Black organizations and community members to address social problems.

In Alexander and Harris' migration research, we also see the working out of the importance of relative group position in motivating actions. White northerners wanted to maintain their dominant economic and social position and Black residents feared that Black newcomers would erode benefits that they once enjoyed relative to local White residents, especially when compared to Jim Crow racial exclusions that prevailed in the South. Misplaced resentment on the part of Black residents sometimes led to gatekeeping activities to monitor migrants' behavior. The concept of relative group position is fundamental in the field of stratification economics, developed by William Darity Jr. (2005) and later generations of mostly Black economists.

Alexander and Harris' research reflected their ties to the African American community and its institutions, and incorporated biases of northern Black residents. Nonetheless, they undertook their studies in order to make useful recommendations that would improve living and working conditions for migrants as well as ease racial tensions. Their scholarship was not motivated by a desire to answer interesting questions, as has been the tendency of later generations of economists, but rather as a way to improve social welfare for Black Americans. This was consistent with research by most African American scholars during the early twentieth century (James B. Stewart 2015). Alexander and Harris focused on the major economic change that was affecting Black Americans—the mass migration of Black Americans from the rural South to the urban North. They provided assessments and policy recommendations that they believed would decrease racial inequities and racial hostilities.

Future Research

The previous discussion comparing the research of Alexander and Harris with later generations of economists indicates possible directions for future research on the Great Migration. The migration studies by Alexander and Harris are rich with details about migrants’ lives and living conditions, demonstrating the long-lasting importance of compiling ethnographic data. Although they conducted their research a century ago, Alexander and Harris’ observations and interviews with migrants left a vivid picture of southern Black migrants’ interior lives and their interactions with people in the communities where they migrated. Future research on the Great Migration would benefit from archival research that seeks to gain an understanding of the migration by placing Black American migrants at the center of analysis.

This type of archival research would analyze historical artifacts—letters, oral testimonies, diaries, written records of civic organizations—with the objective of unearthing migrants’ priorities, aspirations, perceptions, and assessments of the migration. An important question concerns the ways in which migrants’ understanding of intergenerational mobility or racial advances may have differed from later generations of economists or from that of the early Black economists. Alexander and Harris were not southern rural migrants and their views reflected the sentiments of northern Black residents. Economists have focused too heavily on external factors that influenced migrants’ decisions or affected their outcomes. This tendency to depict migrants as acted upon or responding to external factors has had the unfortunate effect of diminishing migrants’ agency in economic writings. Economists have not paid sufficient attention to the Great Migration from the viewpoint of migrants. Archival research that places Black American migrants at the center of inquiry will generate new research questions and directions. An essential component of this research will be the use of an intersectional lens that examines the interplay of gender, class, color, or religion for analyzing dynamics internal to the Black community. Finally, a focus on migrants’ strengths is an important element for future research on the Great Migration by economists—what cultural resources such as folkways did southern Black migrants bring with them that helped them to sustain the migration, transform their new environments, resist subordination, and give new meaning to their lives?

Conclusion

Alexander and Harris’ research on the Great Migration provides us with an opportunity to revisit methods and epistemologies that earlier generations of economists used. Their migration research represents what economist Darrick Hamilton refers to as “the moral burden of economists” (Hamilton 2020, 331). He maintains that economists must embrace the ideals of a just economy that provides sufficient resources so that every American can thrive. The importance of morality as a governing principle through the provision of an equitable distribution of economic resources appears in the writings of early political economists, including Adam Smith. Most schools of thought within a political economy tradition explain economic outcomes and arrangements by examining the role of social context, power relations, historical processes, and belief systems. Hamilton and other progressive political economists also utilize anti-racism as an important ethical value in evaluating and determining policies. He defends the use of these values and methods by noting, “one need not sacrifice rigor to study how institutions and behaviors intertwine with an objective of building economic inclusion” (Hamilton 2020, 332).

Alexander and Harris’ economic analyses were within the tradition of political economy described by Hamilton. In addition to advocating for economic policies that they believed were fair to Black workers, Alexander and Harris carried the moral burden of advocating for policies that would lessen racial discrimination experienced by Black migrants. To do so meant

exposing unjust practices that were detrimental to the welfare of migrants. Their migration research was at the beginning of a distinctly Black American Institutional tradition within the economics profession that gave voice to the concerns of the Black community using an explicitly anti-racist epistemology (Dania V. Francis, Bradley L. Hardy, and Damon Jones 2022).

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