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Ethnicity: Three Black Histories

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## Ethnicity:

# THREE BLACK HISTORIES

The history of black Americans has been unique—and enduring color differences prevent that uniqueness from disappearing. However, black experiences have differed. The legacy of slavery and racial discrimination, economist Thomas Sowell argues, does not explain everything, notably the current plight of the black “underclass” and the past achievements of many blacks. Rather, he suggests, Southern black latecomers to the Northern big city slums are undergoing the same harsh urban baptism, with its attendant crime, broken families, and poverty, that peasant immigrants from Europe went through almost a century ago. Elsewhere, Sowell has argued in favor of better urban education and against federal pressure for proportional representation by race in schools and occupations. Here, he focuses on the contrasting fortunes of three major black groups in an essay drawn from his chapter in a detailed new Urban Institute study, *American Ethnic Groups*.

*by Thomas Sowell*

Black people in the United States are usually referred to as a more or less homogeneous group—by sociologists, newsmen, government officials, even their own leaders. But the history of black Americans is really the history of *three* distinct groups, whose descendants have very different incomes and occupations, and even different fertility rates, in the 20th century.

The first of these groups is the ante-bellum “free persons of color,” who in the 1830s constituted 14 percent of the American Negro population. The second and largest component of the black population consists of descendants of slaves emancipated by the Civil War. People of West Indian ancestry make up the third group, which now accounts for 1 percent of the black American population. To white employers, landlords, bankers, and college officials, these three black groups may “all look

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alike." But the differences among them in socioeconomic status raise important questions about the effect of *color*—as distinguished from culture—in the American economy and society.

The first "free persons of color" in America came from among the African captives who landed at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. They became indentured servants and, like white indentured servants in colonial America, became free after a specific term of service. Slavery in perpetuity developed later, perhaps toward the middle of the 17th century. But even after slavery was established, the ranks of "free persons of color" continued to grow through manumission, escape, and purchase of freedom.

### **For Some, a Head Start**

By 1790, there were 60,000 free Negroes, and by 1860, their number had grown to 488,000. The "free persons of color" differed from the slaves in both racial mixture and geographic distribution. About 37 percent were mulattos, as compared to only 8 percent of the slaves. From the first census of 1790 on through the Civil War, virtually all slaves were located in the Southern and border states. Their work was agricultural, principally growing cotton. By contrast, the "free persons of color" were divided equally between the North and South, and almost half were urbanized—a higher proportion than among contemporary whites.

In the 30 years prior to the Civil War, the "free persons of color" faced progressively worsening economic, legal, and political discrimination. In various parts of the South, they lost the right to vote, to bear arms, to assemble peaceably, to testify in court against whites, to move freely, and to engage in various occupations. Throughout much of the ante-bellum era, black children were not permitted to attend public schools in most states. Some Southern states outlawed the education of black children altogether. However, private schools operated "underground," and the census of 1850 showed most "free persons of color" to be literate even in cities where no black schools were officially recorded. (The importance of the tradition of private schools for blacks may be indicated by the fact that it was 1916 before there were as many Negro youngsters enrolled in public high schools as in private high schools.)

Despite ever more restrictions, the ante-bellum "free persons" of color advanced economically during the 30 years preceding the Civil War. Black property ownership doubled in Virginia between 1830 and 1860, and similar or larger increases

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occurred in other Southern states. In the country as a whole, the free Negroes accumulated an estimated \$50 million in real and personal wealth before the Civil War—at 19th-century price levels. The one right that was not rescinded during the repressive period of 1830–60 was the right to own property. The continued economic progress of “free persons of color” indicates the effectiveness of that one right in isolation.

While the “free persons of color” were, on the whole, very poor, they made great efforts to be self-supporting. Mutual aid societies existed among them as far back as 1787, and by the early 19th century, there were dozens of such organizations in cities like Baltimore and Philadelphia. Some of these later developed into insurance companies, among the largest of black-owned businesses today.

The enduring consequences of the urban, occupational, and educational head start of the “free persons of color” and their descendants are still evident in the 20th century. The family backgrounds of more than half of the black professionals in Washington, D.C., in 1950 included grandfathers who had been “free persons of color.” Nationally, this was true of an even higher percentage of black holders of doctoral degrees. The leading black high schools in the 20th century were in cities where there had been large concentrations of free Negroes before the Civil War—and the top black high schools (Dunbar in Washington, for instance) were founded by such people. Descendants of the “free persons of color” were prominent among the founders of the NAACP and as late as the 1940s constituted half of the students at Howard University.

### The Slave Majority

The relative success of the descendants of ante-bellum free blacks raises serious questions. If there are large socioeconomic differences among subgroups that are indistinguishable to outsiders, then the behavior of outsiders—racial discrimination, for example—is not *all-determining* as regards the progress of those subgroups or of the group as a whole.

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For the vast majority of American blacks, slavery is the dominant fact in their history—not only because it spanned more than half of that history but also because it continues to influence their geographic distribution, culture, and opportunities in a country whose racial attitudes were formed during the era of slavery.

The United States did not import as many African slaves as Brazil, Haiti, Jamaica, or Cuba. Yet by 1825, it held more slaves than any of them. The reason was that slaves survived and multiplied here, whereas they died off under the more brutal conditions of other Western Hemisphere countries, which relied on importing replacements from Africa. Slaves in the United States had a level of food consumption, clothing, health care, and life expectancy not very different from that of the contemporary working poor.

### **Latecomers to the North**

In most of the other slave societies of the Western Hemisphere, the black population achieved freedom in phases, either as individuals or as a group whose prospective emancipation was planned years in advance; in Cuba and Brazil, most blacks had already gained freedom before slavery itself was abolished. In the United States, freedom came with literally overnight suddenness.

After Appomattox, both blacks and whites in the war-ravaged South escaped starvation only through massive aid from the federal government. Grim economic conditions led whites to enter occupations, such as construction, once regarded as “Negroes’ work” and to hold onto them long enough for the same jobs to become known as “white men’s work.” Along with economic and legal repression of blacks came an era of mass violence and terror unequalled before or since. In the 1890s, the lynching of Negroes reached a peak of 161 per year. One reaction of Negroes in the South was migration northward.

The Northern black communities to which these Southern Negroes moved were often culturally quite foreign to them. Like other migrants to the city (including European immigrants from peasant backgrounds), it would take them generations to adapt themselves to the requirements of urban life. By the late 19th century, Northern blacks in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago had made such adaptations and had achieved some modest economic advances as a result. In New York in the 1890s, for example, most Negroes were better off than most of the recent European immigrants. There were few unskilled laborers in the black community, and many held jobs as bar-

**REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF BLACK AMERICANS SINCE 1860**  
(In thousands and as percent of total U.S. black population)



	SOUTH		N. EAST		N. CENTRAL		WEST	
1860	4,097	92.2%	156	3.5%	185	4.2%	4	.1%
1890	6,761	90.3%	270	3.6%	431	5.7%	26	.4%
1920	8,910	85.2%	679	6.5%	792	7.6%	78	.7%
1950	10,226	68.0%	2,017	13.4%	2,227	14.8%	574	3.8%
1960	11,311	59.9%	3,029	16.1%	3,445	18.3%	1,085	5.7%
1970	11,968	53.0%	4,345	19.2%	4,571	20.3%	1,695	7.5%

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the U.S.: Colonial Times to 1970* (Sept. 1975).

bers, waiters, caterers, and skilled craftsmen. Blacks even held a few municipal jobs.

The arrival of masses of unskilled, undereducated Negroes from the rural South not only enlarged the black urban communities; it transformed them. Although Northern migration was a longstanding pattern, extending back to well before the Civil War, the numbers had previously been within the range of absorption by the existing black communities. But in 1900, the proportion of New York Negroes born outside the state surpassed 50 percent for the first time. By 1910, more than three-quarters of the blacks in Manhattan were born outside the state. And this was but a foretaste of the massive migrations to follow. Nationally, the record-breaking number of migrants in 1900–10 was nearly tripled in 1910–20, and that in turn was almost doubled in 1920–30.

### Urban Retrogression

This rapid, enormous influx of less educated, less acculturated, Southern Negroes reversed the trend toward better race relations. The rise of many Northern ghettos dates from this period, when housing restrictions hardened into rigid *de facto*

segregation. In Chicago, where in 1910 more than two-thirds of the black population had lived in predominantly white neighborhoods, attempts by Negroes to move into white neighborhoods were now met by bombings and mob violence. Older black Northerners bitterly blamed the new migrants from the rural South for the retrogression that all Negroes suffered.

Yet with all the serious problems of blacks in both the North and the South, slow but steady economic progress continued. The almost total illiteracy of the black population as it emerged from slavery was overcome. As late as 1880, 70 percent of blacks were illiterate, but by 1910, 70 percent were literate—a remarkable achievement made even more so by a lack of public schools in the rural South. Black incomes rose faster than white incomes in the last third of the 19th century. By 1913—50 years after emancipation—one-fourth of the blacks in the South were homeowners rather than renters.

But the poverty, unemployment, overcrowded living, crime, disease, broken homes, and substandard educational performance common to many immigrant minorities in America struck blacks as well, sometimes (not always) harder than others. While it is tempting to call this a “legacy” of slavery, many of these problems were not as serious in earlier times (during and soon after slavery) as they have become in recent decades. Fatherless homes were far less common among blacks in the 19th and early 20th centuries than during the past 30 years.

#### **BLACKS IN FOUR NORTHERN CITIES SINCE 1910 AND THEIR SHARE OF EACH CITY'S POPULATION**

	<b>NEW YORK</b>	<b>CHICAGO</b>	<b>PHILADELPHIA</b>	<b>DETROIT</b>
1910	<b>1.9%</b> 92,000	<b>2.0%</b> 44,000	<b>5.5%</b> 84,000	<b>1.2%</b> 6,000
1920	<b>2.7%</b> 152,000	<b>4.1%</b> 109,000	<b>7.4%</b> 134,000	<b>4.1%</b> 41,000
1950	<b>9.5%</b> 749,000	<b>13.6%</b> 493,000	<b>18.1%</b> 376,000	<b>16.2%</b> 299,000
1960	<b>14.0%</b> 1,088,000	<b>22.9%</b> 813,000	<b>26.4%</b> 529,000	<b>28.9%</b> 482,000
1970	<b>21.1%</b> 1,667,000	<b>32.7%</b> 1,103,000	<b>33.6%</b> 654,000	<b>43.7%</b> 660,000

(Moreover, very similar proportions of broken homes have been found in various white minorities, past and present, living under similar poor economic conditions.) Unusually high rates of black unemployment and withdrawal from the labor force have also been more prominent phenomena during the past 50 years than in earlier times, nearer to slavery. Every census from 1890 to 1930 found a higher rate of labor force participation among blacks than among whites. Thus, the moral enormity of slavery does not make it a universal cause of social patterns found among blacks in America today.

### The West Indian Contrast

This becomes especially apparent when considering social and economic conditions of the third group of black Americans—West Indians living in the United States. West Indians were also enslaved—under worse conditions than blacks endured in the United States (infant mortality rates among West Indian slaves were seven times those among slaves in this country). But their social and economic patterns are very different from those found among other black Americans.

West Indians have long been over-represented among prominent Negroes in the United States—from Marcus Garvey and Claude McKay in an earlier era to Stokely Carmichael, Shirley Chisholm, Malcolm X, Kenneth Clark, James Farmer, Roy Innes, W. Arthur Lewis, Harry Belafonte, and Sidney Poitier in more recent times. More generally, West Indians have significantly higher incomes and occupational status than native black Americans, and lower fertility rates. This can be seen in 1970 Census data:

	American Negroes	West Indians	National Average
Median family income, 1969	\$5,888	\$8,971	\$9,494
Median years of education	10.0	10.7	10.9
Percent in professions	8.6	15.2	14.0
Percent laborers	8.9	2.6	4.3
Mean number of children per woman	2.4	1.8	2.1

Source: Public Use Sample, 1970 Census

The economic differences are paralleled by social differences and social separation between the two groups. A 1972 study of Barbadians living in New York City showed that 87 percent of them married other Barbadians. A 1962 study of



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native blacks and West Indians in a suburban New York community showed that each had over 90 percent of their friendships within their own group or with whites.

Various reasons have been advanced to explain the economic differences between the West Indians and native black Americans. One is that West Indians are heavily concentrated in the New York City area, where incomes are generally higher than in the South, where about half the native black Americans live. Native blacks in New York City earn about \$1,000 more than blacks nationally, which narrows the gap somewhat but does not close it. Other reasons suggested are that West Indians received a better education under the British school system in the islands, or that white American employers detect their accents and treat them better than native blacks. One way to test these theories would be to isolate second-generation West Indians (born in the United States of West Indian parents), who would have less accent or no accent, and who would be educated in American schools. Census data show second-generation West Indians in New York City surpassing not only native blacks but also first-generation West Indians, *and the U.S. population as a whole*—in 1969 family income (\$10,900), education (11.5 years), and percent in the professions (18.3 percent). Color alone is apparently not as all-determining as is commonly supposed.

### **Self-Reliance vs. Dependence**

The differences between slavery in the West Indies and slavery in the United States may offer some explanation of the socioeconomic disparities between West Indian immigrants and native black Americans. In the West Indies, slaves grew their own food and sold the surplus in the market, while slaves in the United States were issued food or were fed from communal kitchens. In other words, even under slavery, blacks in the West Indies had generations of experience with individual rewards for individual efforts, in at least part of their lives. By contrast, slaves in the United States lived in regimented dependence. Paradoxically (given the greater brutality of West Indian slavery), post-emancipation race relations and job opportunities for blacks were often better in the West Indies than in the United States. This reflected a greater need for black workers in countries without a large white working class. If Negroes there had been confined to the lowest level jobs, as they had been under Jim Crow laws in the South, most higher-level occupations could not have been filled at all. The greater self-reliance of West Indians today, evidenced by their greater entrepreneurial effort and success compared to that of native black Americans, sug-

### RACE AND IQ

In 1969, psychologist Arthur Jensen of the University of California, Berkeley, attributed the low average IQ among U.S. blacks (85 versus a national average of 100) to genetic traits. His conclusions stirred considerable rebuttal. Recent studies by Thomas Sowell, Sandra Scarr of the University of Minnesota, and other scholars have contested Jensen's thesis as they examined various segments of the black population.

For example, among all black Americans, Northerners score higher IQs than Southerners (90 versus 80), while black orphans raised by white families average 106. Black females perform better on tests than do black males (a 1956 study showed five times as many with IQs of 130 and above)—perhaps, says Sowell, because females have a “greater resistance to environmental influence,” as shown by rates of infant mortality and epidemic survival.

Moreover, blacks are not alone in having a history of low IQ test performance. Among white ethnic groups who now rank at or above the national IQ average, many scored poorly at earlier phases of their existence in this country. In 1926, for instance, the median IQ of Slovak immigrants was measured at 85.6; for Greeks, 83; for Poles, 85; for Spaniards, 78; for Portuguese, 84. In 1921, 83 percent of the Jewish immigrants at Ellis Island were labeled “feeble minded.”

Lastly, Sowell cites a 1942 report on the intelligence ratings of white east Tennessee mountain children, who, like most blacks, were isolated from the mainstream of American culture. The report showed them to have a low IQ, comparable to that of blacks. In general, Sowell contends, environmental and cultural factors have had a major effect on black—and white—test performance over time.

gests the enduring effect of these differences.

What do all these intragroup differences—especially evident in the history of “free persons of color” and West Indian blacks—say about our vision of racial problems and their solution? Among the popular explanations for black-white socioeconomic disparities are: (a) genetic or innate racial differences; (b) slavery, discrimination, and other immoral actions by whites; (c) education; and (d) government policy. We can look at these in order.

At one time, it was common to attribute the economic gap between blacks and whites to a racial or genetic inferiority of Negroes. The generally greater success of lighter-complexioned Negroes seemed to lend credence to this. West Indians, however, are decisive evidence to the contrary: They have a higher proportion of African ancestry than American Negroes in general,

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so their substantial socioeconomic achievements can hardly be attributed to Caucasian genes.

Can even an enormity like slavery be automatically invoked to explain every black-white difference today? Not if the pattern in question is absent from descendants of other groups of enslaved people—and present in white groups who were never enslaved. In occupations, crime rates, alcoholism, and fertility rates, the history of blacks in 20th-century ghettos is very similar to the history of the Irish immigrants in 19th-century urban slums (which were worse) and very different from that of West Indian blacks. The moral horrors of slavery—including overwork, brutality, and sexual exploitation of women—were all worse in the West Indies than in the South. Why would the black pattern today resemble that of the 19th-century Irish immigrants rather than that of West Indians today if slavery were the cause?

### **Culture, not Color?**

Racial discrimination by whites is another factor that has obviously affected black history, but it, too, cannot be held up as an all-encompassing explanation. Those West Indians who are the hardest to distinguish from native blacks—that is, second-generation West Indians—are the most prosperous.

The real differences between the two black groups are cultural, as further evidenced by their social separateness from each other even in an era of “black solidarity” rhetoric. That one group has a fertility rate above the national average while the other does not have even enough children to reproduce itself is indicative of fundamental differences in values and aspirations.

Education is also clearly an important variable, but here again the question must be whether it can be automatically invoked—as it so often is. The 1970 Census showed negligible differences in years of schooling between native and West Indian blacks nationally, and no differences at all in the New York City metropolitan area. Yet substantial income differences existed. What cannot be detected in gross statistics are the attitudes and values that determine the extent to which an education will “take.” A classic study of West Indians in 1939 concluded that they had significant advantages in this respect over native black youngsters. More recent data are consistent with that conclusion. Moreover, in those schools where native black children have been successfully educated, the principal difference has been the attitude of parents and students—not physical plant, student-teacher ratios, or “innovative” methods.

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Government policy can be—and has been—a powerful influence in the lives of blacks. Slavery itself was maintained by the availability of governmental force. In the South, Jim Crow laws obviously worked to the disadvantage of blacks, as did separate-but-inferior public education, a historic handicap not yet overcome. More recently, government actions have been both detrimental and beneficial. Federal “equal opportunity” laws in the 1960s rapidly increased black incomes, both absolutely and relative to white incomes. Black family income doubled between 1960 and 1970, while white income rose by only one-third. However, federal “affirmative action” or racial “representation” policies have not produced comparable results in the 1970s.

In recent years, a rise in black incomes and occupational status has contrasted with growing negative indicators. Black teenage unemployment in the 1970s is five times what it was in 1950. The incidence of broken homes, female-headed households, and welfare dependency has also increased. Black jobless rates since 1950 have risen as the federal minimum wage has escalated and doubled in coverage, pricing less-skilled and less-experienced workers out of the market. Other economic and demographic trends influence unemployment, of course; but none of these other variables changed in so dramatic a fashion as to account for a fivefold increase in black teenage unemployment during a period of prosperity and increased general economic advance by blacks. A number of other governmental policies, at the local and national level, have foreclosed employment opportunities (through restrictive occupational licensing laws, for example) and made nonemployment (welfare) a practical alternative for those at the lower end of the economic scale.

All three black groups have shown determination and resourcefulness in advancing in the face of handicaps and opposition. Any national policy that attempts to facilitate their further progress must support these strengths rather than promote dependence and a sense of helpless victimhood.