



Moving into the 20th Century - Interwar Years Through to the 1960s

In 1900 an estimated 90% of blacks resided in the South. This was largely because many of them were either former slaves or descendants of slaves and they remained dependent on whites for economic stability. However, from the early twentieth century until roughly 1969, large numbers of blacks migrated to cities in the North in order to improve their circumstances. These cities included Detroit, New York, Milwaukee, and Chicago. In moving they were hoping for numerous advancements, including better housing, better access to education, and better race relations. The primary incentive that many had to leave was the prospect of gaining fruitful employment in the expanding steel industry. Because of technological advancements in goods production, and the increasing demand for goods during the First World War, blacks were often readily accepted for work in factories. For the first time many of them worked alongside whites in close proximities, although often for unequal pay.

When they arrived in the North many black migrants realised that the promise that the North would improve their circumstances was false. De facto segregation meant that, when they reached major cities like New York and Chicago, they were often relegated to certain residential areas, informally referred to as “ghettos.” Housing segregation meant that the majority of black migrants were subjected to crowded, run down, insulated tenements that had a detrimental effect on their health, psychological well-being, and social mobility. The most notable of these areas was Harlem in New York, which remains a predominantly black and Hispanic neighbourhood today. In the 1920s Harlem became a mecca for black artistic creativity, and this period later became known as the “Harlem Renaissance.” This era inspired an unprecedented number of authors, poets, and artists to express African-American culture through their work, the most notable of which was Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay. Their work contributed to a new public understanding of the creative capabilities of blacks, which, before, went unrecognised. Alongside this work came the development of jazz, a style of music that originated out of a formerly established black music tradition. Jazz developed from a type of music to a lifestyle that was closely linked to contemporary liberation movements i.e. the women’s liberation movement. Black culture consequently became a commodity, and numerous whites travelled to Harlem in order to participate in jazz culture.

Tasks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ak1Uk8-3EE8> [Great Migration + Harlem Renaissance]

1. To what extent do you think that Southern migrants were unrealistic in their optimism about the promise of the North?
2. What affect do you think that blacks leaving the South had on Southern black-white relations?
3. How successful do you think the Harlem Renaissance was in altering the public perception of blacks as useless, lazy, and incapable of independence?