

# TOWARD A PROGRAM OF AGRARIAN RE- FORMS FOR THE BLACK BELT

By HARRY HAYWOOD

THE NEGRO QUESTION in the U.S.A. is basically agrarian in origin and, thanks to imperialist policy, remains largely so in its present setting. At bottom, it involves the problem of a depressed peasantry—share-cropping, chronic land-hunger and dependency—in short, the plantation system, a hang-over of chattel slavery. In all, the question presents the curious anomaly of virtual serfdom in the very heart of the most highly developed industrial country in the world. Slave-whipping barbarism at the center of “enlightened” capitalist culture—that’s America’s “race” problem.

In 1940, nearly 10,000,000 of the country’s approximately 13,000,000 Negroes (77 per cent) lived in the South. Two-thirds of these (6,400,000) lived in rural areas, *i.e.*, they were classed as rural inhabitants; 4,500,000 on farms and the rest in small rural communities. Thus, *nearly one-half of the country’s entire*

*Negro population lives in rural areas and over a third of this population gains its livelihood directly from the land.*

At least four and one-half million Negroes still live in the Black Belt, an area of contiguous Negro majority, which today, more than three quarters of a century after the abolition of slavery, still retains the largest concentration of Negroes in the country—a population half again larger than the whole Negro population of the North, and a third of the entire country’s Negro inhabitants. Embracing the central cotton-growing region of the South, the Black Belt is the area where plantation economy is most firmly rooted, where the peon farms of today coincide with the slave plantations of yesterday.

The Black Belt is the center of America’s Negro problem, the area of its greatest concentration. Here is the seat of the infection from which the virus of Negro persecution spreads throughout the country, contaminating all areas of Negro life. Here, in the status of the Black Belt, is the clue to the economic, social, and cultural inequality of America’s Negro population.

The Black Belt is likewise the matrix of the nation’s “Number One Economic Problem”—the cradle of Southern economic and cultural lag. The standards of living of the South’s white population cannot escape the influence of this area of deterioration. Says Arthur Raper,

"There are literally millions of farm laborers in the Black Belt who are eagerly awaiting an opportunity to work for wages even smaller than are now being paid textile and steel workers in Southern cities."\*

According to the 1940 U.S. Census, the Black Belt contains 172 counties of proven Negro majority. The population of the counties of absolute Negro majority in 1940 was 4,107,248; of this 2,594,660, or 63 per cent, were Negroes. However, the territorial extent of this majority is by no means limited to these counties which represent only the core. It overflows to 368 adjacent counties with a population 25 per cent to 49.9 per cent Negro. A true picture of this area must include these peripheral counties, inasmuch as their boundaries arbitrarily cut across a naturally contiguous Negro territory. Reckoned on this basis, the *real Black Belt spans 540 counties*. In 1930 the Negro population of this area was 4,790,049.\*\*

\* Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 1936.

\*\* This estimate, based upon an analysis of the 1930 U.S. census, is given by James S. Allen in his book, *The Negro Question in the U.S.A.* (1936), which contains the only thorough Marxian analysis of the Black Belt. The contention of many liberal scholars and Southern regionalists that the Negro majority of this area was rapidly disintegrating as a result of "huge migrations" amounting to a veritable "mass exodus" of Negroes, especially during the war, is refuted by all authoritative data including the latest statistical information released by the Department of Commerce on Negro migrations during the recent war. An analysis of these reveals no substantial reduction of the Black Belt Negro population over the period of the last fifteen years. The 1940 U.S. census shows a 4.5 per cent absolute decline of the entire Negro agricultural population (approximately 200,000) during the decade 1930-40. This figure embraces the entire agricultural South. Moreover, it can be safely assumed that a large part of the migration of that period was to South-

The Black Belt counties trace a crescent through 11 of the 13 Southern states. Sloping downward from its eastern point in Virginia's Tidewater section, it cuts a strip through North Carolina, embraces the whole of South Carolina and most of Georgia and Alabama, engulfs Mississippi and the Louisiana Delta, wedges into eastern Texas and southwest Tennessee, and has its western anchor in southeast Arkansas.

This huge territory, spanning the heart of the South, with a population larger than that of Norway or Switzerland and nearly as large as that of Chile, lies screened behind a maze of State and County boundaries, artificially maintained by the South's rulers with an eye to perpetuating the political impotence of its predominantly Negro population. The social and political problems posed by the continued co-existence of this great community of people, shackled by a common slavery and bound by a common history, ethnic origin and aspirations, are matters of

ern urban centers, many of which are in the Black Belt itself.

Wartime estimates of Negro migrations during World War II vary, ranging from half a million to a million. The U.S. Bureau of Census in its "Special Wartime Survey" of non-white residents population in ten congested war-production areas gives a total of fewer than 300,000 Negro immigrants. Significantly, three of these areas were within the Black Belt. The Survey further shows that not all of the Negro migration was from the Black Belt or even from rural areas of the South. It reveals, further, that a new feature in Negro migration of World War II was the break-away from the South-North pattern which had characterized Negro migration since the Civil War. The migration during the recent war had its origin in the South but ended in war-boom cities without regard to geographical location.

growing import, not alone to the South but to the whole country.

PLANTATION SYSTEM—  
GENERAL FEATURES

The general features of the plantation system can be summarized as follows:

The plantation system rests on large-scale commercial farming, with cotton as its chief money crop. Cotton is likewise the leading income crop of the whole country. The central cotton-growing regions are coterminous with the Black Belt region of Negro majority. In 1929, 3 out of 4 Negro farm operators, as against 2 out of 5 whites, received at least 40 per cent of their gross income from cotton.\*

The profitable production of cotton under the plantation system demands an abundant supply of cheap labor. Labor must be subservient, dependent—that is, unfree. The most intensive exploitation of labor is assured by a combination of legal and extra-legal pressures rooting back into slavery.

Cotton is cultivated by the most primitive labor-consuming technique, which has not essentially changed since slavery. The archaic methods of cotton cultivation prevailing in the Black Belt plantations operate to maintain labor standards lower than anywhere else in the country. The result is that the cotton-growing area has become a base

for a huge depressed agricultural "reserve," pulling down the standards of the whole South.

The United States position on the world cotton market is being increasingly undermined by the growing competition of other cotton-producing regions and in late years by a number of cheaper substitutes. This means a growing intensity in the exploitation of the working cotton farmer, who is forced to compete with imperialism's colonial serfs in other parts of the world.

The South's one-sided dependency upon cotton gives rise to some of that section's major ills. Says the National Emergency Council, "No similar area in the world gambles its welfare and the destiny of so many of its people on a single crop market year after year."\*

Inherent in the plantation single-crop system are its uneconomic and wasteful production methods, characterized by some authorities as the "most reckless exploitation of natural and human resources known to history." Soil decadence is far advanced in all cotton areas. A sample study in 1933 suggests that at least one-third of the Southern land was eroded and that half of all the eroded land in the country was in the South.

The single-crop system robs the tenant farmer of home-grown foods; the dearth of essential food crops in this area poses one of the South's

\* U.S. Census Bureau, *Negroes in the United States*, 1930-32.

\* The National Emergency Council's *Report to the President on Economic Conditions of the South*, July, 1938.

main problems, pointing up dietary deficiencies and the prevalence of diseases of malnutrition endemic to this region, such as pellagra and hookworm. The denial to the share-cropper of the right to plant gardens is a component of the system of plantation usury.

Agrarian overcrowding assumes a degree unmatched in other agricultural sections. It is inherent in the plantation system with its outmoded and uneconomic methods of land usage. Gunnar Lange reports that "the Negroes in the Old South have less land to support themselves on than they had a generation ago."\* This fact, viewed in the light of the increase of the population dependent upon the land which has nearly doubled since the Civil War, gives the picture.

These economic and social flaws in the South's agrarian structure left the region peculiarly vulnerable to the ravages of the world-wide agricultural crisis, chronic since 1919, and from which Southern farming has suffered more and recovered less than any other sector of the nation's agrarian economy.

#### THE PLANTATION'S SOCIAL RELATIONS AND CONTROLS

The key to the understanding of the Negro problem, as well as that of Southern ruin and poverty in general, must be sought in an analysis of

agrarian relationships in the plantation regions of the South.

*Land Monopoly.* The best land of the region is tied up in the iron-clad monopoly of a feudal-minded and parasitic planter caste, with the great mass of working farmers and farm hands deprived of access to it by all sorts of social and legal restrictions.

The concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few big white planters was revealed by Davis, Gardner and Gardner in a study of a typical Black Belt county in the Deep South. Of the nearly 2,000 farm operators in the county (nine-tenths of whom were Negroes) fewer than 400 owned any land in 1933; of these 400, 36 persons owned or controlled practically half of the land and almost a third of the cultivable land. Seven of these 36 persons owned or controlled 22.2 per cent of all the land, although they constituted but a third of one per cent of all farm operators. Taking the farm-owning unit as the family and not the individual, one would find as much as *three-fourths of all the land in this county owned by 36 families.*\*\*

*Tenancy, Dixie Style.* The agricultural ladder on the plantation has the following rungs: landlord at the top, then cash renter, share-cash tenant, share tenant, cropper, with the wage hand at the bottom. Between these various types of tenants there is con-

\* Gunnar Lange, *Trends in Southern Agriculture*, Unpublished MSS prepared for the Myrdal Study.

\*\* Davis, Gardner and Gardner, *Deep South*, 1946. A similar picture is presented in Arthur Raper's study of 2 typical Georgia Black Belt Counties. (Cited Work.)

siderable difference in economic status and degrees of dependency.

On the highest rung of the tenants is the cash renter, who rents his farm for a fixed sum of money. In this category may be included the standing-renter, who pays rent with a fixed quantity of the crop. In all other categories, the landlord gets a certain share of the main cash crop; e.g., one-fourth, one-third, one-half, and in some cases even three-fourths. Those receiving half the crop or less are share-croppers, while the cash tenant and standing-renter owns all his work stock, furnishes feed, fertilizer and tools; the other groups furnish less and less, the lower their tenure status, with those lowest on the ladder differing little in status from the wage hand. It can be seen that the cash-renter most closely approaches the tenant in more developed capitalist areas. He supervises his own farm and in some cases hires labor or even rents out a part of his tract for sharecropping. His social status and relations are therefore on an entirely different basis from those of the crop-sharing categories.

In 1940 there were 1,449,000 tenants in the Census South, and of this number 506,638 (a little over a third) were Negroes. Forty-one per cent of the South's white farmers as against 75 per cent of its Negro farmers. On the basis of color and tenure, they were divided as follows:\*

	White	Negroes
Cash	189,667	64,000
Share-Cash	132,131	6,547
Share	389,561	89,483
Croppers	242,173	299,118
Others	89,123	46,806

This table shows that the great bulk of the South's tenants fall into the crop-sharing categories. The Negroes, comprising one-fourth of the South's population, constitute *nearly a half of all its tenants, and more than one-half of the crop-sharing groups*. The higher the ascent on the agricultural ladder the fewer the Negroes; e.g., they comprise only one-third of the cash tenants.

Thus, share-cropping is the most typical form of Southern tenancy—a form peculiar to the plantation. Share-cropping is a hybrid form, combining features of both capitalism and chattel slavery in the exploitation of the soil tiller.

The share-cropper is not really a tenant in the modern capitalist sense, but a laborer paid with a share of the crop, lacking the legal rights of the tenant as well as the laborer's right to collect a cash wage and spend it on the open market. They are, as Lenin observed, "semi-feudal, or what is the same in the economic sense, semi-slave tenants." Share-cropping and related forms are direct survivals of chattel slavery, with the "rent in kind" (the landlord's share of the crop), permanently and arbitrarily fixed independent of market relations. In many Southern states the

\* Adopted by the author (H.H.) from Bureau of Census, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, *Agriculture*, Vol. III, Chap. III, 1940.

cropper has no legal right to the crop.

The essential features of share-cropping can be inventoried as follows:

1. To a large degree it rests on the family system, *i.e.*, the unpaid labor of women and children.

2. It is characterized by landlord or riding-boss supervision of the crop as well as of the labor of the tenant.

3. The landlord or time-merchant designated by him is the sole source of credit, with the landlord keeping the books. Cheating and usury are inherent in the system, with interest rates on "advances" and "furnishings" in some cases as high as 50 per cent.\*

4. Legal controls—"crop lien laws" which give the landlord a prior claim on the crop are in force in 9 cotton states; "false pretense" statutes, which make "contract jumping" a felony or a misdemeanor—still exist in some states. Vagrancy laws are prevalent throughout the South.

5. Peonage, though outlawed by the U.S. Supreme Court, is inherent in the plantation system in which there has been no change in recent times.

All this adds up to a chronic and growing dependency indebtedness and impoverishment of the Negro cropper. In a study of 700 Negro cropper families in Alabama in 1935, Harold Hoffsommer estimated that they "broke even" during 45 per cent

of the total years, lost money during 30 per cent, and cleared some profits above all expenses in 25 per cent. Of 3,000 current cropper families, the author found 40 per cent indebted to their present landlords with a debt of more than one year's standing, averaging about \$50.\* These were the facts noted by the late President Roosevelt who wrote that "the economic ladder of these American citizens has become a treadmill."

*The Plantation Wage-hand.* The 1940 Census gave 470,000 Negro agricultural workers in 13 Southern states as against 495,000 whites, a number altogether out of proportion to the Negro population. These figures do not include the large group of unpaid child laborers below the ages of 14. Moreover, these workers are scattered throughout the South and work under varying conditions. In this study we are primarily concerned with the plantation laborer, about whom no adequate information is given in the 1940 Census returns. However, on the basis of separate studies one can get a fairly good picture of his position. He is subjected to the same social and legal compulsions as the cropper. He is deprived of even the latter's tenuous security, that is, all-year-round work. He is essentially a "seasonal" worker. On the plantation, he usually gets his wages in terms of credit. His hours are just as long as those of the cropper, his wife and children are forced

\* Harold Hoffsommer, *Landlord-Tenant Relations and Relief in Alabama*, No. 9, F.E.R.A., Washington, D. C.

\* *Ibid.*

to labor in the field, and he is subject to the same riding-boss supervision.

*Small Owner of Family-Sized Farms.* The plantation regions also contain a number of small farm owners. In the main, these belong to the marginal farming class, relegated to the poorest soil, whose farms are usually highly mortgaged. The 1940 Census gave 174,000 Negro farm owners, a drop from 220,000 in 1910—almost a 20 per cent decline. The position of the Negro small-owner is shown in the following figures: The average size of a farm operated by Negro owners (60.4 acres) is about the same as for white sharecroppers (58.9). The mean value of land and buildings of Negro farms (\$1,443) is lower than that of even the white sharecropper's plot (\$1,908). The value of implements and machinery of the colored owner was given as \$90—only a fraction of that which the white owner has at his disposal (\$322).

*The "Color Caste System."* The most malignant and far-reaching of all evils spawned by the plantation is its system of color caste. Without an understanding of the race factor, its tremendously important role in shaping and perpetuating the status quo of Negro-white relationships, it is impossible to get at the real core of the Negro problem.

This system is founded upon spurious race dogmas which depict the Negro's servile status in American life as not the result of man-imposed proscription, but as a condition fixed

by nature with Negro inequality supposedly due to natural, inherent differences. In this credo, Negroes presumably are a lower form of organism, mentally primitive and emotionally under-developed. "Keeping the Negro in his place," a place assumed to be fixed by holy writ, is thereby justified. Color of skin becomes an index to social position. The biological category becomes a social factor, and is used as an instrument for perpetuating and intensifying Negro subjection.

This hideous shape, which has its antecedents in ante-bellum times and beyond in the primitive era of mankind, permeates the entire cultural pattern of the South; it is fixed in its folkways and customs, sanctioned in its laws, and, in the last analysis, is buttressed by violence and lynch terror. From its base in the semi-feudal plantation system, anti-Negro racism has spread throughout the country, shaping the pattern of Negro-white relationships in the North as well. With the clandestine encouragement of Yankee financial power and its controlled agencies of public opinion, the dogma of the Negro's "inherent inferiority" has been cunningly infiltrated into the national consciousness of the American people; it has become part of the "American way of life."

*Race and Nation.* In reality, the so-called racial persecution of the Negro is a peculiar form of national oppression, used by the ruling classes of the U.S. in much the same manner in

which their counter-parts of other oppressor nations use such social and cultural differences as those of language and religion to preserve the isolation and oppression of subject peoples. America's rulers, in the absence of such socio-cultural distinctions between white and Negro and language and religion, have endowed the factor of race—a purely biological concept—with social meaning by means of fictitious and utterly unscientific race theories. However, in the ideology of race the dominant classes have a much more potent weapon at their disposal than even religion or language. These latter as social phenomena are historically transient; whereas race, a physical category, persists.

*The Race Differential in Southern Agriculture.* In the South the color-caste system is used by the imperialist oppressors and their Bourbon henchmen to blur fundamental class relationships, to obscure the deep social fissures in Southern society, and above all to conceal the socio-economic nature of the Negro question which is *fundamentally that of a subject nation.*

The anti-Negro differential in Southern agriculture finds its fullest expression in landlord-tenant relationships on the plantation. Here it operates to reinforce the legal and social restrictions imposed on the Negro by virtue of the economic survivals of slavery, with the extra-economic element of racial coercion. The result is that the process of class

differentiation becomes warped, distorted, and one-sided. The great mass of Negroes are literally frozen at the lower tenure levels, there to form a virtual "Fourth Estate," with movement up the ladder into the higher tenure groups effectively barred.

A striking example of the operation of the race factor as a brake upon the Negro's social advancement is to be seen in the obstacles placed in the way of his acquisition of land. Says Raper:

Whether a particular Negro can buy a particular tract of land depends upon its location, its economic and emotional value to the white owner and other white people, the Negro cash and credit resources, and doubtless most important of all his personal qualities in the light of local attitudes; he must be acceptable . . . considered safe, know his place. . . .\*

The stifling effects of the race factor is most strikingly illustrated by the drastic difference in the economic and cultural status of Negro and white on the same tenure level. This contrast, which runs the whole scale of the agricultural ladder in the Black Belt from landowner to the lowly cotton cropper, is fully documented by the same author in the same work, containing a study of two of Georgia's Black Belt counties.

*Imperialism and the Plantation.* The secret behind the stubborn persistence of the plantation system in modern economic life is to be found

\* Arthur F. Raper, Cited Work.



in Wall Street control and support of plantation credit. Yankee gold, symbolized in the financial power of Wall Street, is the hidden hand behind plantation medievalism. This is the sacred shrine at which worships the "Yankee hating" Bourbon landlords. It is the great Moloch to which is offered up the blood, sweat and tear-soaked sacrifices of the Negro bondsman and the great propertyless mass of Southern "poor whites."

The penetration of big Northern money into the South's plantation economy dates back to the period of slavery. Even at that time, plantation financing depended upon outside credit sources in the North and in England. But the real big invasion of Northern capital could begin only after the Civil War. The victory of the North in that war fully established the claim of the newly ascendant capitalist class to complete and undisputed dominance of the Southern market. In destroying the chattel slave system, the main obstacle to capitalist penetration of that region was removed.

From Reconstruction onward, the South's agriculture was subjected to a sustained and continuously accelerated penetration by Northern capital.

With the advent of imperialism, *i.e.*, the stage of monopoly capital, in the U.S., the newly concentrated power of finance capital, streamlined for better and more efficient plunder, was turned with full force upon the South. The rain of golden manna

supporting the decadent plantation economy swelled to the proportion of a veritable flood. Northern finance capital, seeking outlets for gigantic capital surpluses, turned increasingly to the plantation, attracted by its cheap semi-feudal labor and its cheap cotton. The usurious grip of big capital on the plantation became a stranglehold. All this added up to a manifold increase in the oppression of the basic mass of the South's agricultural population, particularly the Negroes, to whose already onerous burden was added the weight of increased exactions by the imperialist plunderers from the North.

In summary, the transition to the imperialist stage meant that the plantation, its color-caste system and its political and legal controls, had become an integrated part of American economic and political life, inextricably interwoven into the structure and sub-structure of American monopoly capitalism. The status quo of Negro inequality becomes a rigid pattern from which escape is possible only on the basis of anti-imperialist struggle.

*Wall Street, Usurer Supreme.* Finance capital's domination of plantation economy is exercised through its control of plantation credit. The credit chain extends in a direct line from the counting room of Wall Street down through the regional and country banks, and is anchored in the crop lien system. The whole Wall Street credit structure is based upon the maintenance of crop lien.

The landlord's prior lien upon the tenant's crop is the essential collateral demanded by the big credit institutions of the North. If he also has a lien on livestock and other property of the tenant, so much the better; his credit facilities are thereby enhanced. Just as in ante-bellum times the chief consideration for planter loans was the number of slaves he owned, so now, in modern times, the extent of his credit is based upon the number of tenant liens he holds. And, as we have seen, the crop lien is the central cog in the plantation system of legal controls—the legal sanction of plantation landlordism and Negro serfdom.

The holding of these liens as collateral is not only the essential demand of private institutions, but of the Federal government as well. A Works Progress Administration study of 646 plantations showed short term interest rates of 10 per cent on

government loans, 15 per cent on bank loans, 16 per cent on merchant accounts.\* These exorbitant interest rates are of course passed along the line to the share-tenant in the form of usurious credit charges on "furnishings" and "advances."

Finance capital functions as an oxygen tent, preserving and continually reviving the antiquated tottering plantation economy and bolstering its decadent landlord class. It is the main force in preserving Negro oppression, and in retarding and distorting the modern development of the whole South.

*(This is the first installment of Comrade Haywood's article on agrarian reforms in the Black Belt. The article will be completed in the October issue—The Editors.)*

\* T. J. Wooster, *Landlord and Tenants on the Cotton Plantation*, 1936, W.P.A. Division of Social Research, Washington, D. C.