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The Impact of the Great Depression on Different Racial Communities

The Great Depression is a well-documented era in recent American history which not only highlights the impacts of flawed economic policy, but also the blemishes in social reform. The image that comes to mind when describing the “average American” during the Depression, and perhaps even today, is that of a white person, or a white family, who has experienced tremendous loss in such a short time. This image, although not entirely inaccurate, is not inclusive of the experience of non-whites living in the United States during this time. Is this due to a lack of records concerning the situations of the minorities? Or it it perhaps because somehow minority peoples were immune to the adverse effects of the Depression? The answers to both questions are simply no. The relationship between race and economics had an indirect variation during the stages of the Great Depression, and this is not solely due to the behavior of the minorities themselves. Research will prove that the American ideal of rugged individualism, as well as social reform, came with a glass ceiling for Blacks, Mexicans, Asians, and Native Americans.

It is quite possible that the most overlooked minority group in a discussion of this nature would be the Asians. After immigrating to the United States en masse in the 19th Century, the Chinese faced an enormous pushback that would culminate in legislature that would successfully put a chokehold on Chinese immigration known as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The reason for this act is quite simple, and will be a common theme in the analyses of the treatment of different racial minorities during this time in history; immigrants, particularly those who do not share a common skin tone or lineage as that of someone from a Caucasian background, would never come to be fully accepted as an American. This notion would be amplified by the

fact that the low-skilled jobs that the Chinese took up, which were in the mining, railroad, and agricultural industries, essentially lowered the standard of living for other Americans; as Asian immigrants accepted jobs for lower wages, white Americans eventually had to accept lower wages.¹ Employers are aware of the rudimentary economic benefits of hiring cheaper labor, and the Chinese exploited that fact. The Chinese Exclusion Act would be bolstered by similar policies such as the Immigrations Acts of 1907 and 1924, which would also even begin the process of deporting Asian members of American society. With the clear undercutting of Asians in the recent times leading up to the Crash of 1929, it comes as no surprise that the Asian minority was overlooked when drafting New Deal policies. Although federal mandates did not explicitly exclude Asians from receiving relief, racism found a prominent role in the local enforcement of New Deal programs. These discriminatory practices led to dire situations for the Asian American, and a lack of government support led to the strengthening of ethnocentric communities. In places like San Francisco's and New York City's Chinatown, where Chinese unemployment was approximately 50%, the Chinese found difficulty in obtaining work outside of the ethnic community, especially in the upper tier white collar positions.² In 1933, a group of New York businessmen lobbied for a city ordinance that required one-person laundries to pay expensive annual fees in order to operate, in aims of crippling and eliminating the Chinese laundry service from the city.³ Laundry services were well known to be Chinese establishments, and this sort of direct attack on a racial group comes as no surprise in the string of legislative policies passed against Chinese Americans. The Chinese prevailed after banding together as the

¹ Daniels 29-66

² Daniels 67-99

³ "New York City Council Passed an Ordinance Targeting Chinese Laundry Establishments; Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance Is Formed." Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), www.mocanyc.org/learn/timeline/new_york_city_council_passed_an_ordinance_targeting_chinese_laundry_establishments_ch.

Chines Hand Laundry Association (CHLA) and fighting back against the ordinance. It was through ethnic integrity in which the Chinese would maintain resilience in the face of governmental discrimination. All was not bad, however, as New Deal policies would eventually improve living conditions in San Francisco's Chinatown, jumpstart the development of Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, and provide various public works programs that were specifically tailored to Asian communities. With all this being said, it was not the aims of the U.S. government which handicapped the Asian presence during the Depression, rather it was the racially based practices that have roots in nativist theory that would slow hinder the improvement of living conditions of Asians during this time. Overall, the general state of social mobility for Asians after the Great Depression was inconclusive. As the future would show, the push for social justice for Asians would vary greatly, with the Chinese Exclusion Act being repealed in 1943 but the Japanese being mass interned at the very same time.

Another group that faced governmental racial harassment was the Mexicans. Once the demand for unskilled, cheap labor decreased around 1930, this group of immigrants was no longer desirable by the employers that have once given them work. Similar to the situation at hand with the Asians, competition with whites for whatever low-paying jobs were available rose, which led to street sweeps and deportation missions by local and national agencies.⁴ This, combined with a rising unemployment rate upwards of 50% and a lowered decreasing daily wage from \$2.55 in 1930 to only \$1.30 in 1933 made it nearly impossible for Mexicans to live a life of subsistence.⁵ To even further their woes, New Deal policies would also even work counterproductively for Mexican farm laborers. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration's (AAA) crop reduction program would further joblessness for farm workers, a working

⁴ Balderrama and Rodriguez 119-158

⁵ Davis

population which disproportionately was largely comprised of Mexicans and other minorities. Still, there surely must have been some level of relief available for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans at this time? To begin answering this question, it should be restated that no New Deal program explicitly barred noncitizens or unauthorized immigrants from receiving assistance.⁶ In fact, key members of the Committee on Economic Security (CES) advocated for the provision of New Deal assistance to noncitizens.⁷ Be that as it may, this did not prevent the Mexican minority from being discriminated against during the Great Depression on a national scale. The Social Security Act of 1935 included language that “barred agricultural and domestic workers from Social Security and Unemployment Insurance”⁸, which largely blocked scores of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans from receiving aid from these programs. Within the programs that were available, such as the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) or Old Age Assistance (OAC), the federal government failed to provide safeguards, which led to high levels of Southern discrimination within public assistance that maintained Jim Crow.⁹ Other programs that were available required permanent addresses as a standard requirement for application, an item which many Mexican American families did not have.

The Mexican response to these injustices played out in two different theaters. In the first, there occurred a mass exodus of the Mexican population. The federal response to Mexican poverty was the promotion of repatriation and deportation, which has been analyzed to be an “explicit Hoover administration policy”; relative to the treatment of other racial groups during the Depression, Mexicans were the only recipients of this sort of treatment.¹⁰ Alongside mass

⁶ Davis

⁷ Fox 4

⁸ Fox 7

⁹ Fox 7

¹⁰ Gratton and Merchant

inhumane deportation, voluntary migrations totaled approximately 400,000 persons between 1929-1937.¹¹ As large as this number may be, there still remained a large Mexican population within the states. The second type of response was formulated by Mexican-Americans who remained in the United States formed labor unions in order to advance their cause. The most notable of these unions are the Mexican Farm Labor Union, the Confederation of Mexican Farmers and Workers (CUCOM), and the Mexican women who joined the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU). The Mexican Farm Labor Union led a successful strike in California which led to a minimum wage \$0.25 per hour.¹² CUCOM amassed 10,000 members by 1935, making it the most active agricultural workers' union in California.¹³ The ILWU strike of 1935 also succeeded in halting production and creating new contracts for garment workers. By examining this moment in history, it is clear that the Mexican solidarity is what carried them through the times of the Depression. While the government worked against them and treated them as second-class citizens, Mexicans fought for their right to be considered Americans. If there is anything in common between Asian and Mexican history in America, it is that these minority groups relied primarily on the unity of their ethnic groups to survive the hard times of the Great Depression.

The Native Americans are one of the groups who experienced great social mobility during the New Deal era. After the atrocities they had faced in the previous century, such as forced removal and assimilation, it serves as a sigh of relief that the federal government finally advocated in a great way for this group. Yet, the specific injustices must be recollected in order to contextualize the negative extent to which the Native Americans were living at this time. The

¹¹ Gratton and Merchant

¹² Barajas

¹³ Barajas

Indian Removal Act and the Dawes Act were two pieces of legislation that reveal a very dark age in American policymaking in regard to the handling of minority groups. By the 1920's, American Indians had lost most of their land, and an unending cycle of poverty began to afflict these peoples. The fears of the Native American people had peaked with the passing of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. This act, which was passed without consultation or consent from native communities, granted unilateral citizenship to all Native Americans. This furthered the threat of tribal territory loss, as the amalgamation of large groups of Indians into American citizenry gave the United States government a basis on which to claim even more lands. With the stage of being set in this manner, it is sensible to predict that the condition of the American Indian minority had only one direction to travel, and that was upwards. In 1928 the Meriam Report, which was a 2-year survey on the conditions of American Indians across the nation in relation to the impact of governmental policies (such as the Dawes Act) on Indian standards of living, was released. The Meriam Report provided information and data that drove future public works programs for the Native Americans during the 1930's. This data included information on infant mortality rates, which were twice the national average, sanitary conditions, access to health care, family income, and school quality.¹⁴ In all of these areas, the Meriam Report criticized the conditions as grossly inadequate.¹⁵ The agency responsible, which was the Bureau of Indian Affairs, was harshly criticized and reorganized upon the revelation of these facts. It was the BIA who was in charge of forced assimilation, child abduction, and mass Christianization.

In the 1930's, under FDR-appointed John Collier, the BIA received a much needed facelift. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 granted increased Indian independence and sovereignty,

¹⁴ Szasz

¹⁵ Szasz

as well as access to federal funds. Nondenominational schools were implemented on reservations in lieu of funding religious boarding schools. The only catch to these funds was the reorganization of Native governments, so that they resembled contemporary constitutional structures.¹⁶ The Johnson O'Malley Act of 1934 subsidized education, health care, and other services to Native Americans not residing in reservations in order to promote inclusion into the public sphere. These programs would come to be known as the Indian New Deal. Many Indians were wary and suspicious of the government's change in heart and willingness to help their condition. Based on the hardships they had to endure in the past century, they were completely right to think so. Nevertheless, these reforms aided in the relief and recovery of the Native American status. Archaic institutions of forceful assimilation disappeared as unemployment decreased and political autonomy increased during the Depression era. For the Native Americans, there were many victories that came out of Great Depression reforms. This is, of course, not before the worsening of their condition by the very same government who would eventually end up helping them.

An analysis of racial groups during any point in American history would be incomplete without considering the conditions of African Americans. General Sherman's promise of 40 acres and a mule was diluted as wage labor, largely in the form of sharecropping. Other Blacks found themselves involved in low-skilled occupations, accompanied by low pay. The legacy of Jim Crow was still alive and well in the South, and Plessy v Ferguson legalized race-based differentiated treatment going into the 20th Century. From the perspective of the African-American, many changes were made for the betterment of their condition, but little progress was won. The contrast between the events of the Red Summer of 1919 and the boom of the Harlem

¹⁶ Philp

Renaissance during the 1920's depicts how fickle the general American attitude towards African Americans was at this time. This capricious demeanor was permeant in New Deal programs as well. As mentioned earlier, the AAA crop reduction program impacted agricultural workers; being that many African Americans were sharecropping or tenant farming, the crop reduction program impaired Black employment greatly. The African American youth was discriminated at the local level in the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) works programs, despite the fact that the program was designed to be open to all. Since the CCC's conception in 1933, it was not until 1938 when Blacks comprised a meager 11% of those employed by CCC initiatives.¹⁷ The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) also barred the African American population from gaining access to managerial, high-paying positions.¹⁸ With Black unemployment rates exceeding 50% nationwide, the African American view of the New Deal was very negative, so negative that amongst themselves they referred to it as the "Raw Deal".¹⁹

It should be noted that during this time the act of lynching still occurred, with over 50 individual occurrences happening throughout the 1930's.²⁰ In addition to this, FDR was apprehensive of collaborating with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) when drafting the First New Deal due to potential backlash from Southern Democrats in 1932. Victory in the election momentarily superseded the importance of equality for minorities, which led to such a raw state of affairs for African Americans. Fortunately, this was all changed in the Second Hundred Days (or Second New Deal) of 1935. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided literacy programs to approximately 250,000 African

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Americans.²¹ The National Youth Association (NYA), who was directed by Mary McLeod Bethune, the first Black American to head a government agency, provided governmental assistance in education, helping almost 6,000 youths complete their education.²² Perhaps the biggest indicator of African American approval of FDR is the election data from 1932 to 1936. Hoover, a Republican, won 66% of the Black vote in 1932. In 1936, Roosevelt was able to secure 76% of the vote, representing a historic change in the voting patterns of African Americans in that point in time. Roosevelt created a special “Black Cabinet” to advise him on matters related to the social advancement of African Americans, as well as appointing NAACP attorney William Hastey as the first federal judge in U.S. History in 1937.²³ Similar to the Native Americans, African Americans emerged from the New Deal in an arguably better state than they had going in.

To the benefit of the modern historian, an abundance of research and data exists for a topic such as this. Therefore, it is not the question of whether or not discrimination happened, rather it is a question of why it happened and why it continues to happen today. Why did Native Americans and African Americans receive greater support than Asian Americans and Mexican Americans? One could argue that since those two groups endured longer terms of hardship, they deserved more expedient reform. But does reform have to only come to those who had suffered longer? Is social justice in American history only given a little at a time? Under the Roosevelt administration, many precedents were set which laid the foundation for later civil rights movements of the century. One could consider the advancements made for the minority during Roosevelt’s tenure as revolutionary, as it kickstarted a trend in favor of social mobility which is

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still in motion today. Still, the fact that a later civil rights movement was needed pinpoints the flawed social working of the United States government, as the drastic conditions of minorities would continue even after New Deal programs were implemented. Once war struck, minorities were once again placed on the backburner and it would take another few decades until segregation was deemed unconstitutional. Furthermore, America needed wakeup calls in the forms of the Civil Rights Movement and the American Indian Movement to provide perspectives on the realities of the people that White Americans shared the country with. If there is anything that can be learned from analyzing history, it is that history is doomed to repeat itself, or as some historians would argue, the repetition of certain themes such as racial discrimination indicates that such a theme never in fact ended in the first place.²⁴ This is why it is important to commemorate the struggles that groups and individuals experienced in our collective American past. It makes one wonder what historians of the future will have to say about the state of American social justice in the 21st Century.

²⁴ Han, Alexander H. Lecture Notes: A Manuscript of Select Phrases from Nicholas E. Levis. Queens College. During discussion following a written report on Studs Terkel's Oral History of the Great Depression, Professor Levis argued against Alexander Han's question on the seeming inevitability that history repeats itself. Levis proposed that if similar events, such as racial or social injustice, continue to happen, it is not history repeating itself, rather it is the continuous act of allowing such events to happen.

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