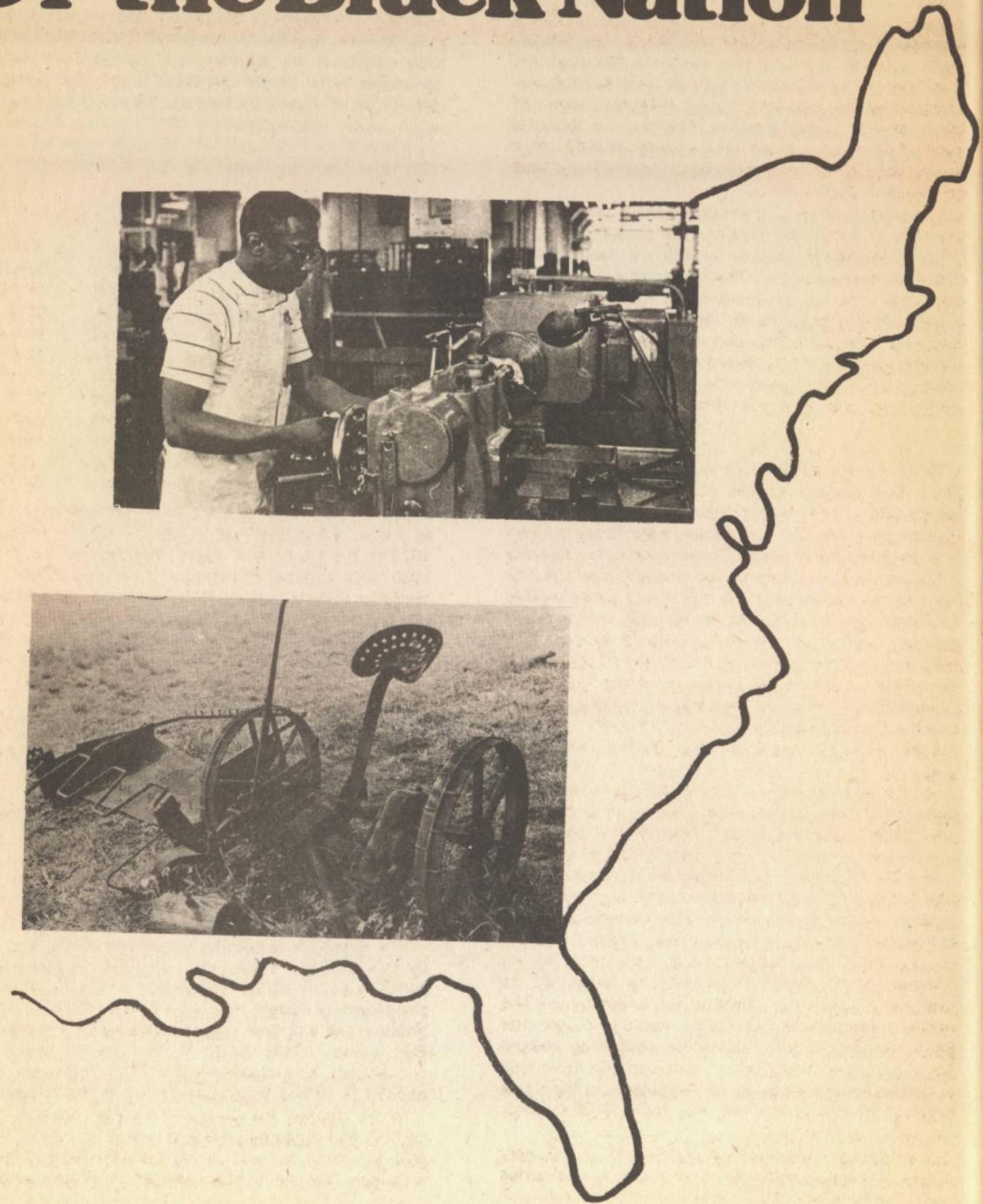
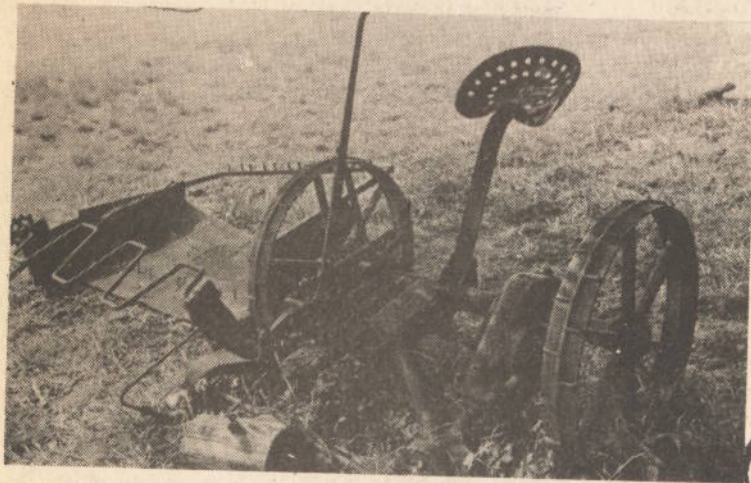
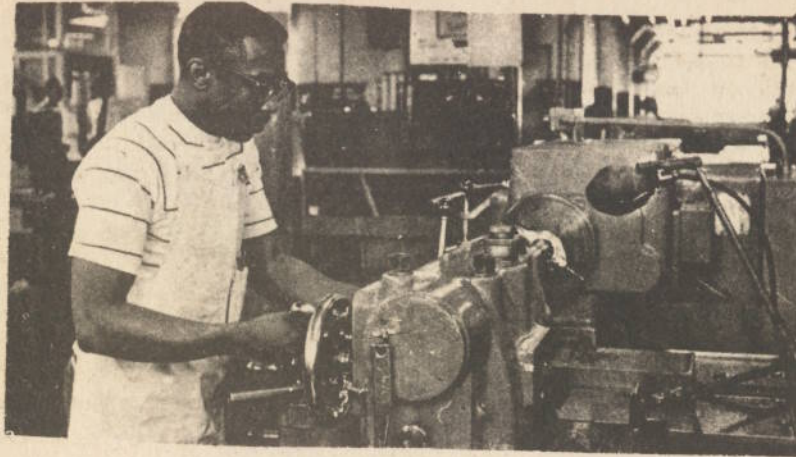


The Dissolution Of the Black Nation



U.S. capitalism, like capitalism elsewhere, was to exhibit the tendency to assimilate nations. It was to assault and ultimately undermine the material foundations of the Black nation in the Black Belt. This tendency in the U.S. in relation to the Black nation was to take the concrete form of the expropriation and dispersal of the Black peasantry.

As we have already noted, the historical constitution of the Black nation was bound up with the plantation. It was the plantation that concentrated the Black people in the Black Belt. It was the semi-feudal, slave remnants of its political economy that gave the Black nation its economic cohesion and its stability. The plantation, with its "purely Russian system of labor service" constituted the material foundation of national oppression as well as its predominate form, a form based on the tying of the Black people to the land as a serf-like labor force.

The separation of the mass of the Black people from the land and their conversion into a predominantly urban, proletarian people rested on two related historical developments. First the great migrations to the urban, industrial centers in response to the growing demand for Black labor, and secondly the decline of the plantation and its transformation with the abandonment of backward methods of production based on the traditional land tenure system in favor of purely capitalist methods of farming.

* * * * *

From the end of the Civil War to World War I the Black Belt reveals marked stability in terms of its demography. The ratio of Black to white reached its highest point in 1880 and declined only very slightly over the next thirty years. This demographic stability reflected the dominance of the plantation on the one hand and the absence of any significant urban market for Black labor on the other. In 1910 the area of Black majority was essentially the same as it had been in 1860 and as the maps indicate continue to conform in its concentration to the contours of the plantation system. As fig. 8 shows, the Black Belt in particular and the South generally continued to be the home of the vast majority (over 75%) of the Black people in the U.S.

World War I was to introduce the first major element of change into this pattern of stability, a significant demographic and class shift in the Black population.

The acceleration of industrial production due to the war came at a time when European migration had peaked and begun to decline. The wartime blockade eliminated this source completely while the labor supply was at the same time being constricted by the military draft. These circumstances combined to produce a substantial demand for Black labor. The northern employers sent labor recruiters into the South where the local exploiters sought to compel Black people to "stay home" through a combination of propaganda and terror. Nevertheless, in the years between 1915 and 1918 no less than 500,000 Black people moved North.

Prior to this time most industrial work was largely closed to Black people. In 1910 the only industries

with any large concentration of Black workers were railroads, mining, saw and planing mills, and construction. In these industries Black people were generally in the lowest paying, unskilled jobs. During the war years for the first time large numbers of Black workers were employed in meat packing, steel and auto as well as the war industries like munitions and ship building. The numbers of Black workers in mining and transport increased sharply. Black women, particularly in the early postwar years found jobs in the garment industry. The pattern of discrimination, characteristic of the pre-war years, continued with Black workers consigned to the dirtiest, most dangerous and low paying occupations within these industries.

Population of Black Belt (1860-1970)

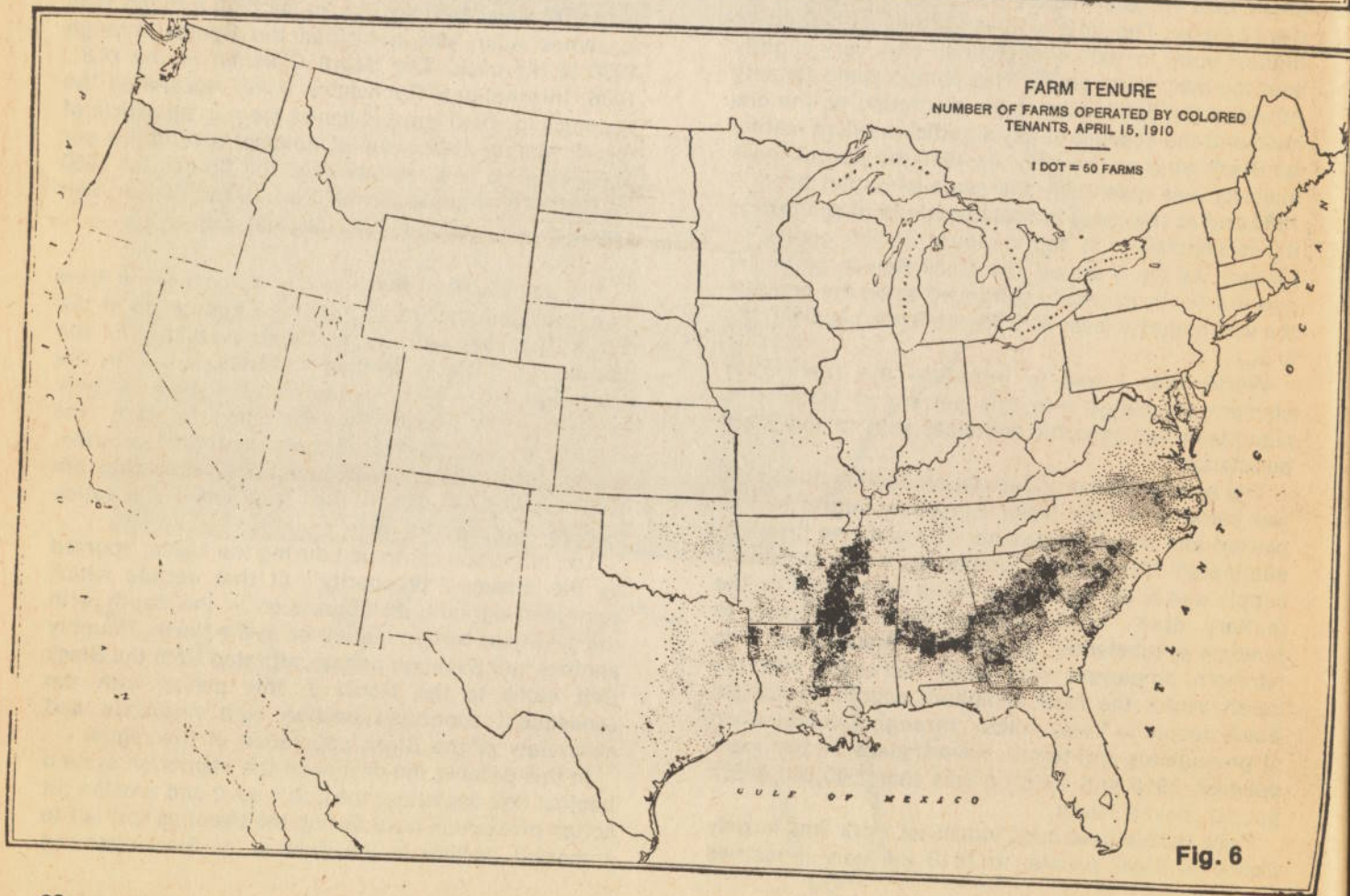
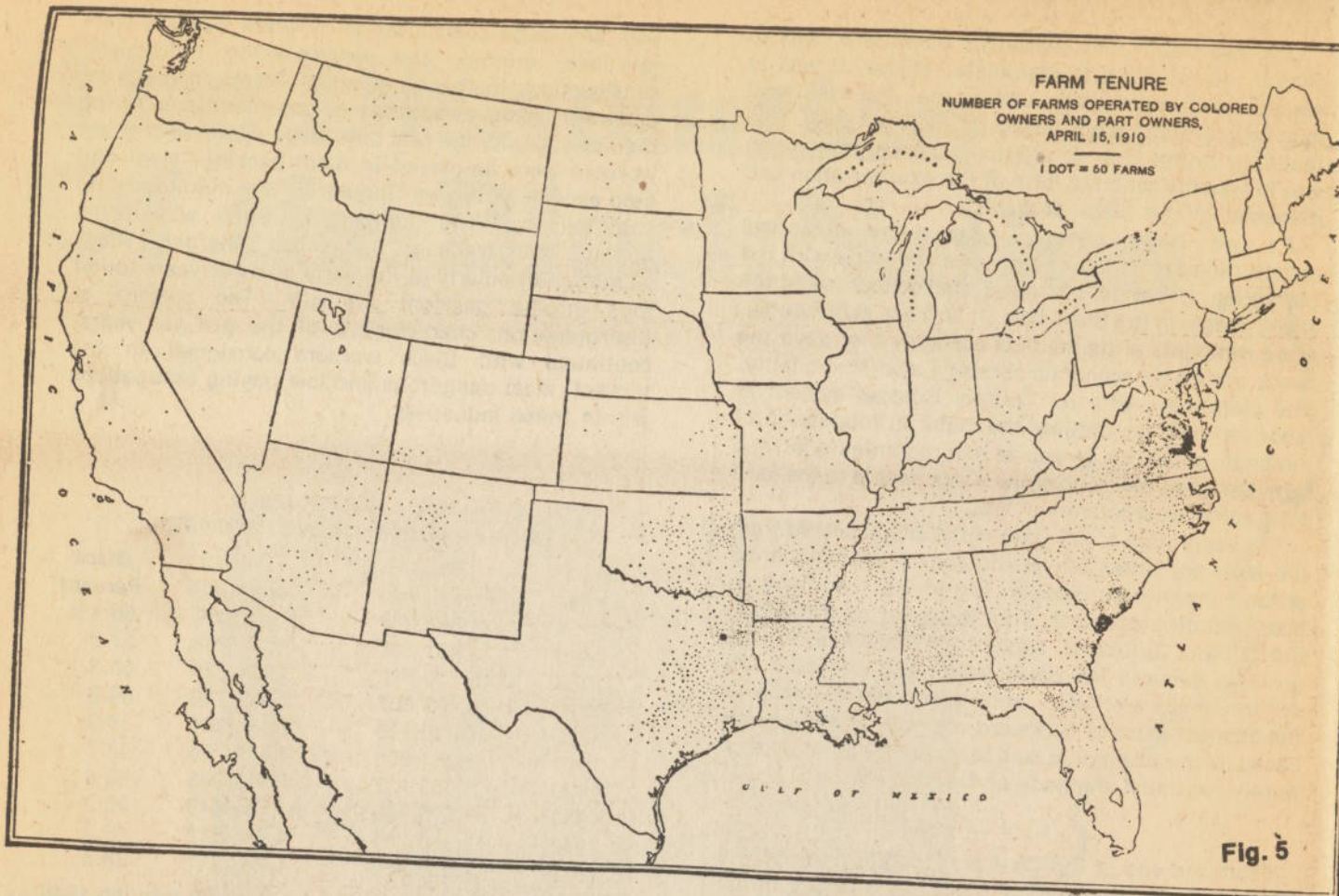
Census Year	Total Population	Black Population	Black Percent
1860	4,362,009	2,461,099	56.4%
1870	4,431,597	2,560,263	57.8
1880	5,750,410	3,466,924	60.3
1890	6,465,307	3,866,792	59.8
1900	7,498,900	4,488,991	59.9
1910	8,387,958	4,842,766	57.7
1920	8,968,132	4,806,565	53.6
1930	9,525,865	4,790,049	50.3
1940	10,256,289	4,993,612	48.7
1970	11,037,426	4,288,911	38.5

Note: The source for the figures for 1860 through 1940 is James Allen who published the figures through 1930 in his book, *The Negro Question in the U.S.*, 1936, International Publishers. Allen researched the statistics for 1940 and published them in an article of the November 1946 issue of *Political Affairs*. To our knowledge no one has tabulated the figures for 1950 or 1960. The figures for 1970 are based on our own research utilizing the 1970 census. Ed.

The migrations of these years led for the first time to an absolute decline in the Black population of the Black Belt as well as a marked decline in the population of Blacks relative to whites. However, the character of Southern agriculture was largely untouched by these developments. In fact, the number of Black farm operators continued to grow, particularly in the tenant categories, indicating the continued strength of the traditional plantation system (see fig. 10).

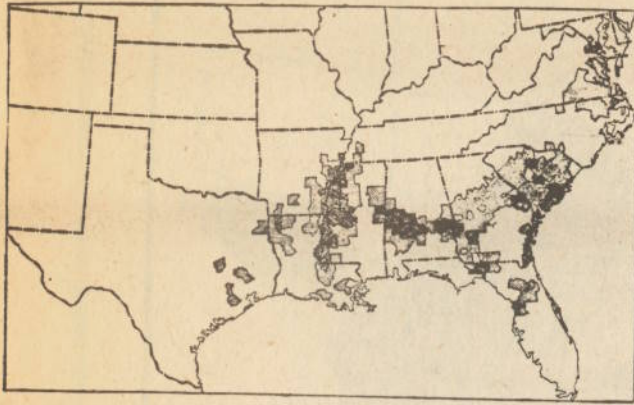
The migration continued during the 1920s, spurred by the uneven "prosperity" of that decade which combined agricultural depression in the South with the growth of certain industries in the North. Roughly another half a million people migrated from the Black Belt alone to the North in this period with the consequent continued decline both relatively and absolutely of the Black population of the region.

In this decade, the decline of the plantation system begins. Soil depletion, the boll weevil and erosion hit cotton production hard during the twenties and led to a modest decline in the number of Black-operated

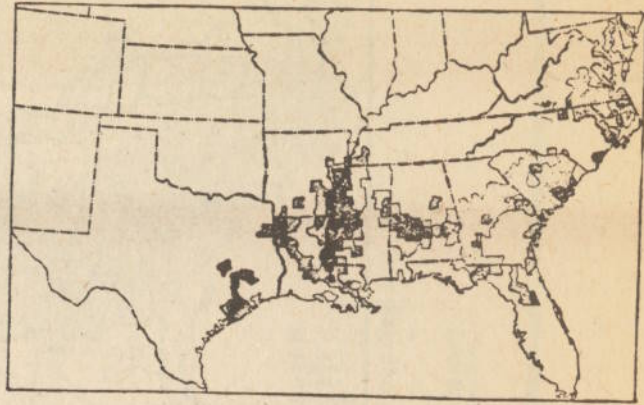


SOUTHERN COUNTIES IN WHICH THE PROPORTION NEGRO IN THE POPULATION WAS 50 TO 75 PER CENT, AND 75 PER CENT AND OVER:
1910, 1900, 1880, AND 1860.

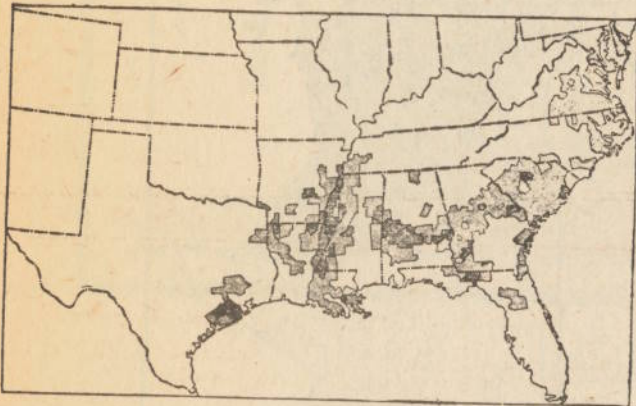
MAP III.—1910.



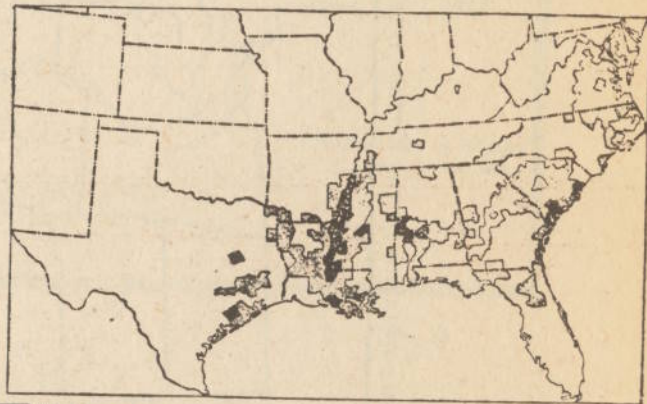
MAP IV.—1900.



MAP V.—1880.



MAP VI.—1860.

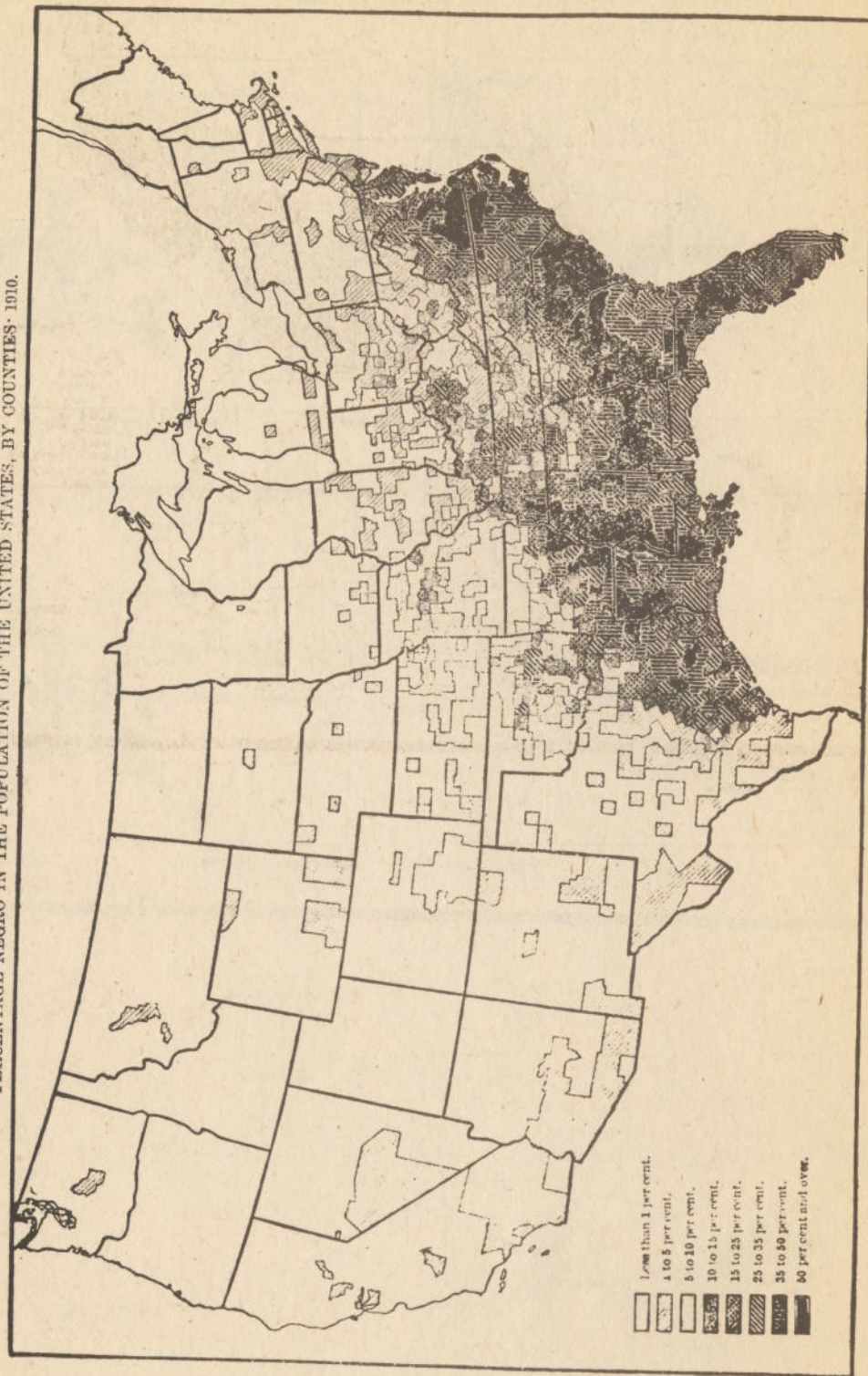


50 TO 75 PER CENT

75 PER CENT AND OVER

Fig. 7

PERCENTAGE NEGRO IN THE POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES, BY COUNTIES, 1910.



(16)

Fig. 8

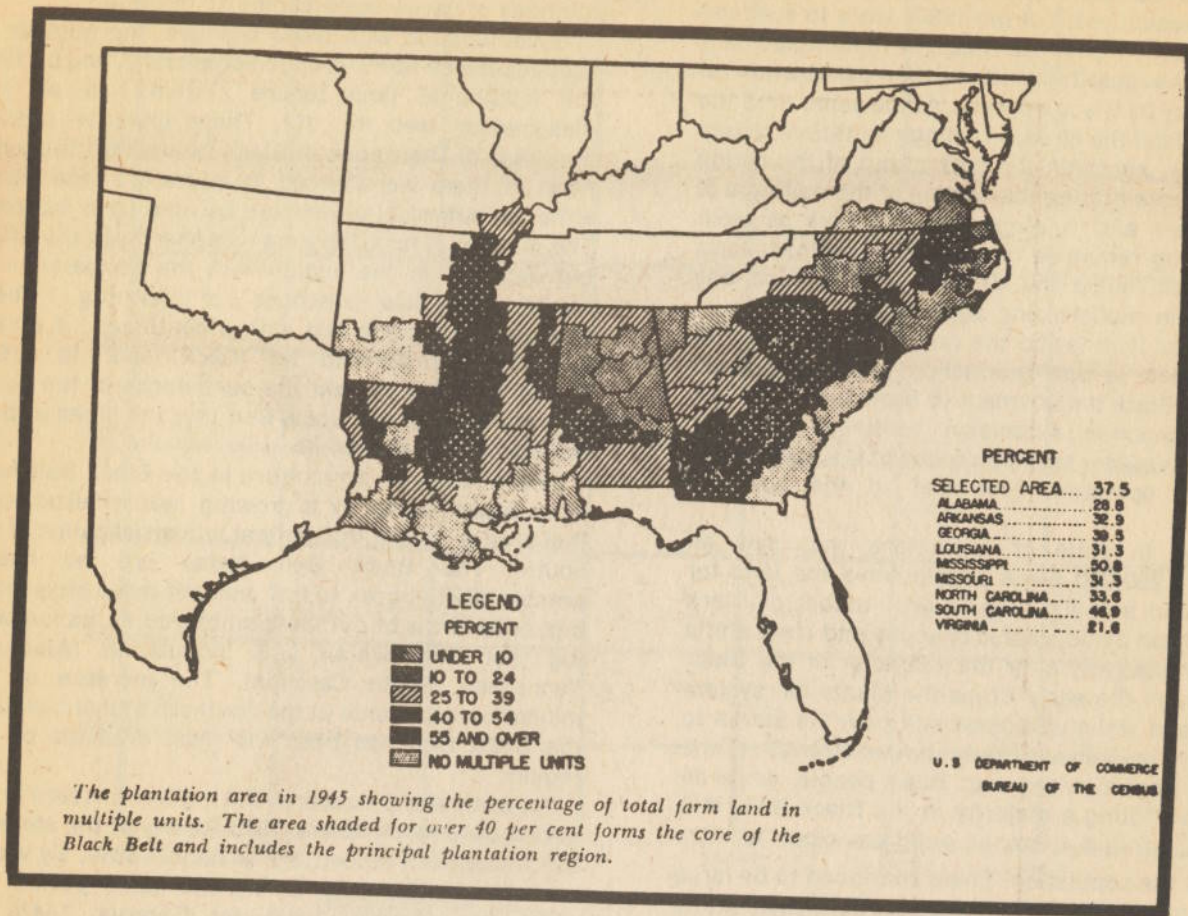


Fig. 9

farms and a general increase in indebtedness. This decline did not signal any qualitative change in the character of Southern agriculture, however, which remained as backward and oppressive as ever.

The depression years of the 1930s were to suspend the migratory trend as massive unemployment foreclosed the possibility of further penetration of basic industry by Black workers. At the same time the depression dealt the already reeling plantation system a heavy blow, knocking the bottom out of the cotton market and accelerating the decline of the numbers of Black farmers and ruining many planters as well. Sharecropping remained intact as the dominant form of production, since the depression precluded any investment in modernizing agriculture.

World War II renewed the migratory trend out of the Black Belt as war production provided a great stimulus to Black employment in basic industry. The post-war economic expansion continued to spur migration thereafter and the decline of the numbers of Black farm operators continued in the post-war period.

However, in spite of migrations that saw an estimated 2,250,000 Black people leave the land for the cities and a sharp drop in the number of Black farmers, these demographic changes and class shifts did not qualitatively alter the character of the Black Belt. Through the early fifties the plantation system persisted and while weakened still gave its stamp to the region. Fig. 9 shows the continued strength of the plantation right after the war. Black people, while no longer constituting a majority in the Black Belt, still were concentrated there in numbers close to fifty percent of the population. There continued to be large numbers of counties (180, down from nearly 300 at the turn of the century) where Black people were in the majority. The persistence of the plantation system was reflected in the superstructure where in spite of the democratic advances of the thirties and war years, the planter's system of white supremacy with its denial of elementary democratic rights, its lynchings and its Klan terror was still firmly entrenched.

It is only in the 1950s with the introduction of mechanized agriculture in the South that the plantation system really begins to disintegrate and introduces a qualitative change into the character of the Black Belt. During the war years there had been some mechanization of agriculture, but this had taken the form of the introduction of more tractors rather than any real revolutionizing of the methods of production.

In the early fifties, technological change was stimulated by the poor competitive position of Southern cotton. The development of synthetic fibres, the growth of irrigated cotton cultivation in the southwest and the greater profitability of raising other agricultural commodities all acted to compel the planters to alter their methods. Chemical herbicides, mechanized pickers and the rotation of cotton with other profitable crops like soybean as well as diversification into cattle were all new methods introduced from the fifties onward.

The mechanical cotton picker eliminated the need for hand weeding and picking. By 1962 over half the

cotton picked in the South was by this method. The mechanization and diversification of agriculture rendered small plot tenant farming obsolete and thus finally compelled the plantation to adopt the modern methods of large scale capitalist farming.

In conjunction with these changes, the number of Black operated farms dropped drastically, and by 1970 the traditional land tenure system had all but disappeared (see fig. 10). These changes pushed hundreds of thousands of Black farmers off the land. Most of them were forced to migrate to the cities, although substantial numbers became farm laborers. The number of farm laborers rose sharply in the fifties but declined in the sixties with the acceleration of capital intensive methods of farming. These developments combined with a continued, if erratic and uneven, demand for Black labor in urban industrial areas explain the persistence of the Black migration out of the Black Belt into the cities of both the North and the South.

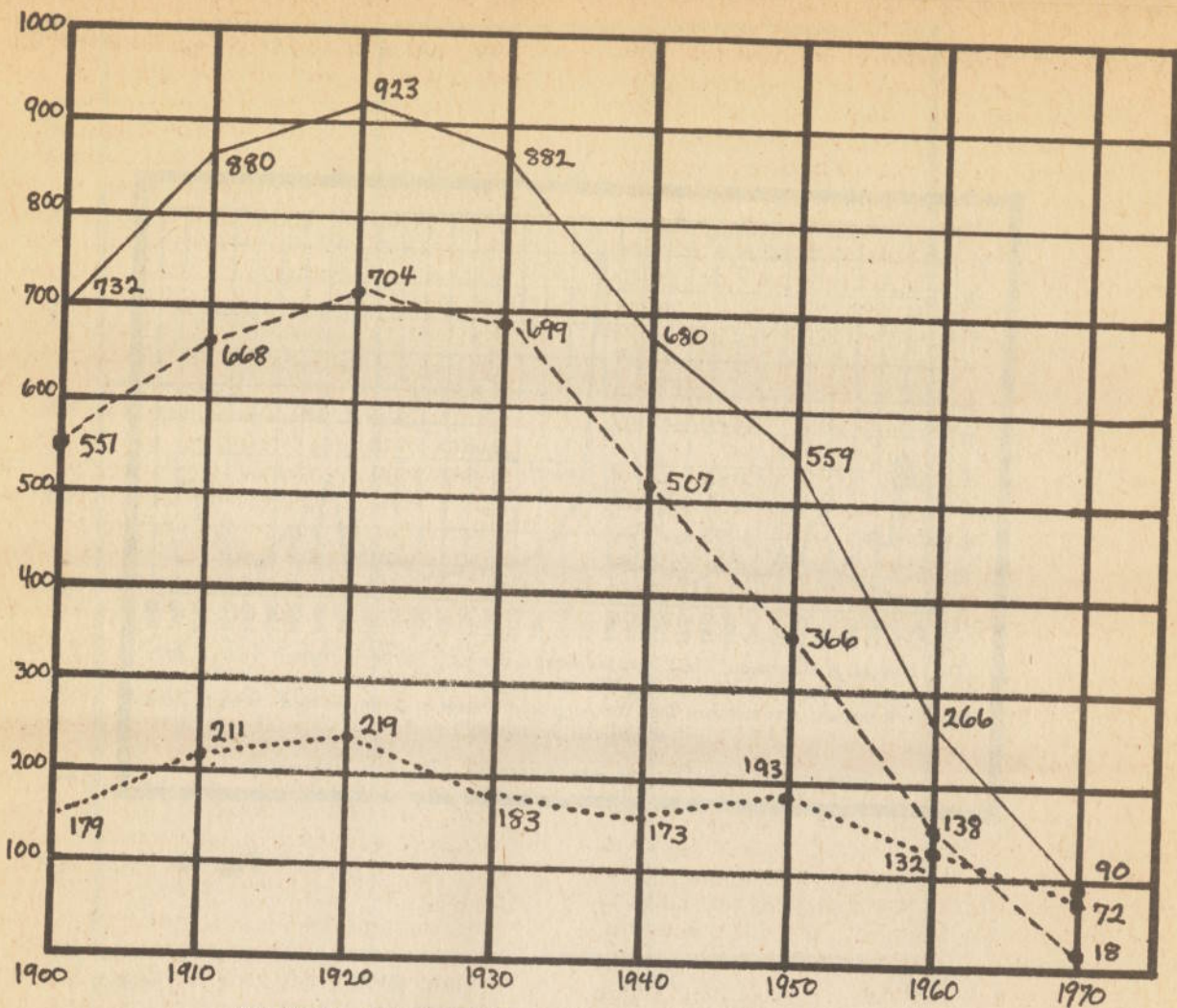
The changes in agriculture in the Black Belt have been accompanied by a growing industrialization of that area as part of the general industrialization of the South. The Black Belt states are no longer predominantly rural. In fact many of these states rank higher in terms of numbers employed in manufacturing than the overall U.S. population (Alabama, Tennessee, South Carolina). The increase of the industrial labor force in the Southern states including the Black Belt has been the most dramatic of any region.

For example, Ohio scored the highest increase in the period between 1940 and 1970 for any of the states of the midwestern industrial heartland—83%. By way of contrast the increase during the same period was 110% for Virginia, 144% for Georgia, 144% for Mississippi and 254% for Arkansas. These figures indicate the rapid process through which the South, while still relatively backward, is catching up with the rest of the U.S.

Of course this development is in large part a reflection of precisely the historical backwardness of the area with its roots in white supremacy and Black oppression. The weakness of the labor movement, the domination of reaction in the state governments and the consequent availability of cheap labor are the motive forces of industrialization. But the effect nonetheless tends toward the negation of this same backwardness and the elimination of any qualitative difference between the South and the country as a whole.

* * * * *

The transformation of Southern agriculture, the growth of industrialization and the great migrations have served to eliminate a Black majority in the Black Belt. The Black population has declined absolutely (from 4,993,612 in 1940 to 4,288,911 today) and relatively (from 48.7% in 1940 to 38.5% today). Over the last thirty years the total population of the Black Belt has grown by nearly 800,000 while the Black population has declined by over 700,000 during the same period.



NUMBER OF SOUTHERN FARMS OPERATED BY BLACKS BY TYPE OF OPERATION IN THOUSANDS (1900-1970)

Note: Tenant includes all types of tenancy.

LEGEND

- Total number of Farms —————
- Tenant Operated - - - - -
- Owner Operated

Fig. 10

	1940	1950	1960	1970
Tenant operated:	74.6%	65.6%	51.9%	20.0%
Owner operated:	26.4%	34.5%	48.1%	80.0%

Percentage of tenant operated and owner operated farms between 1940 and 1970. (Note: Owner operated includes farm managers.)

Fig. 11

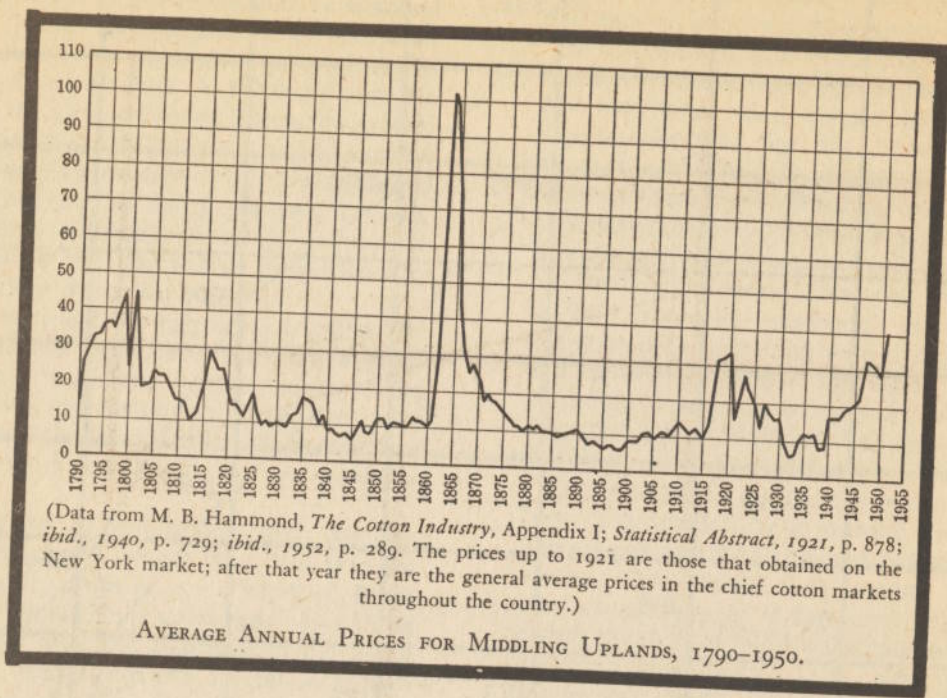


Fig. 12

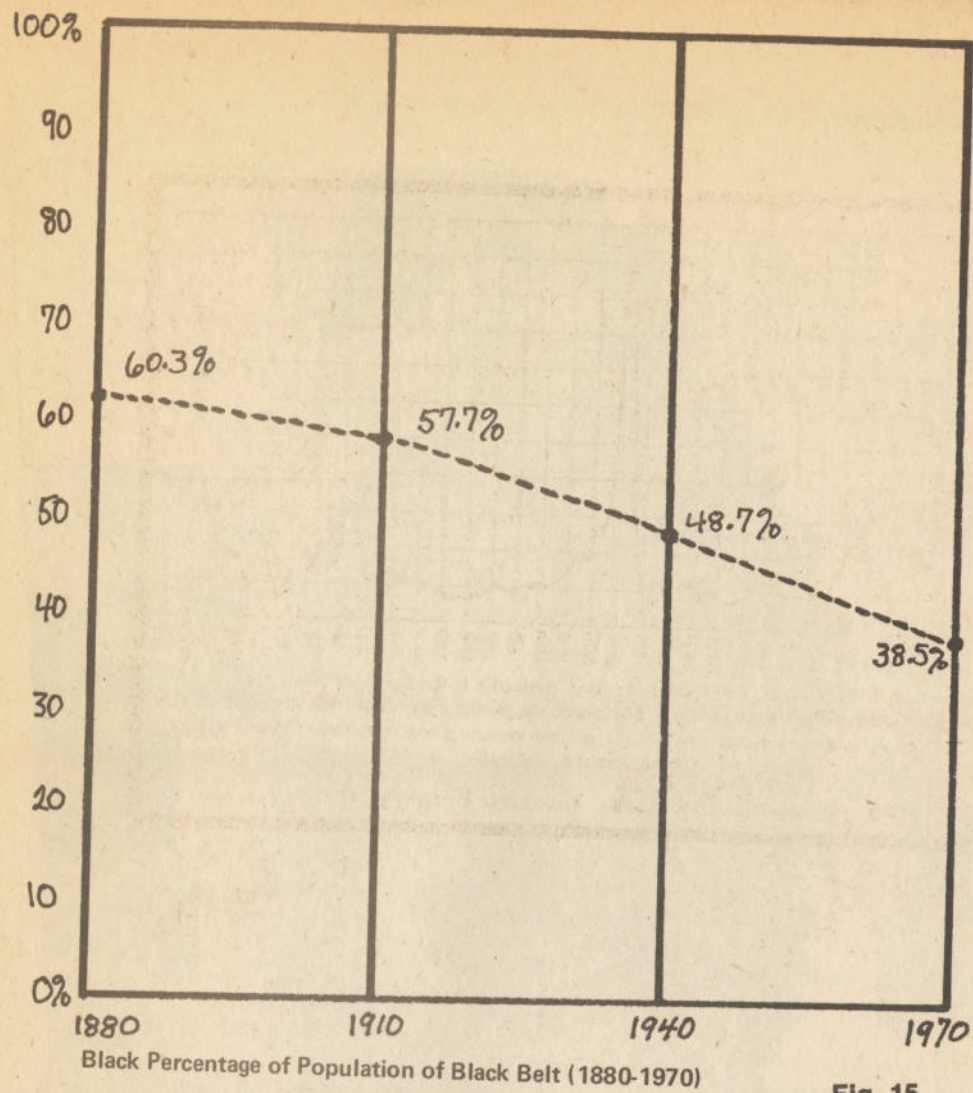


Fig. 15

MISSISSIPPI -- BLACK POPULATION BY COUNTY -- 1840

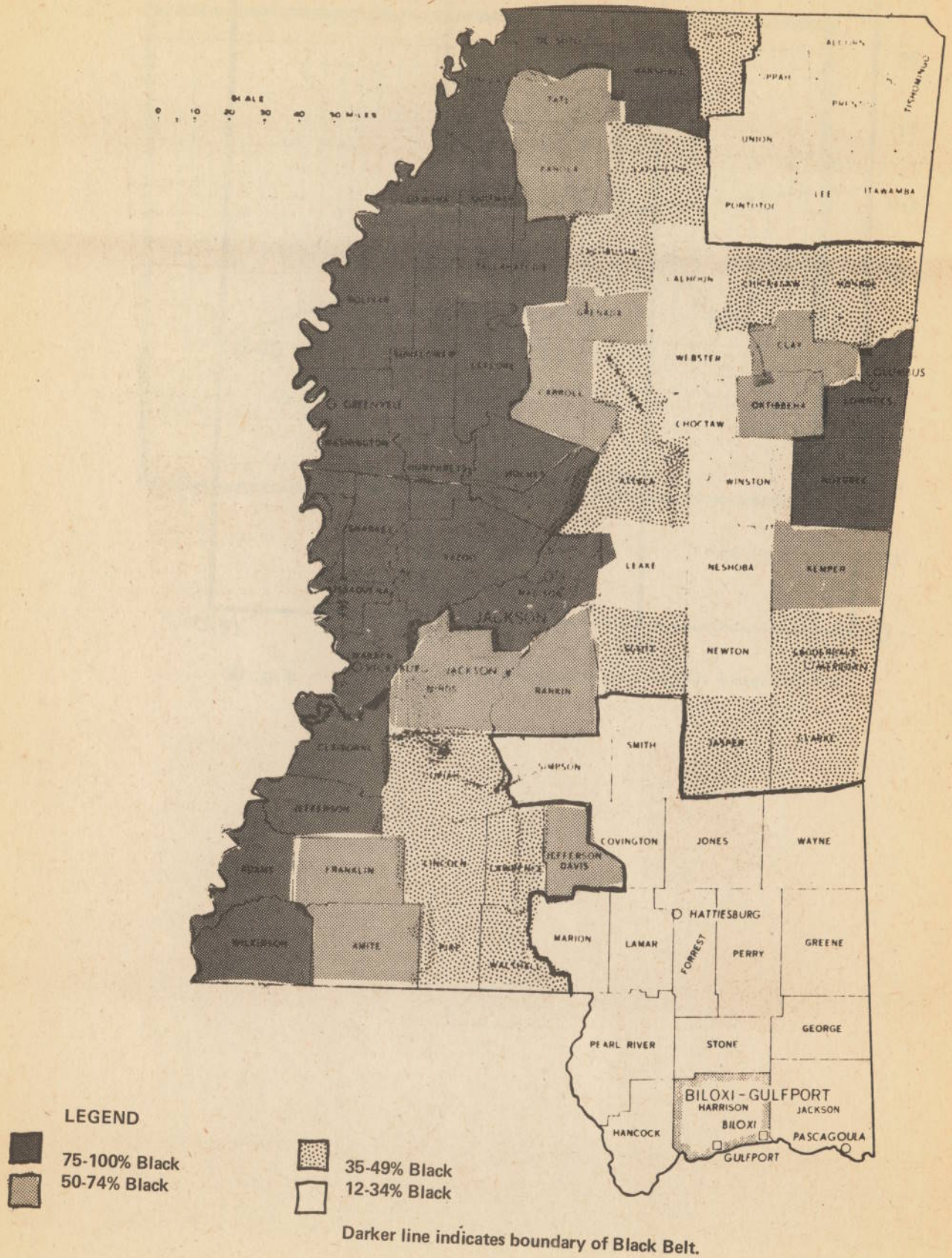


Fig. 13

MISSISSIPPI -- BLACK POPULATION BY COUNTY -- 1970

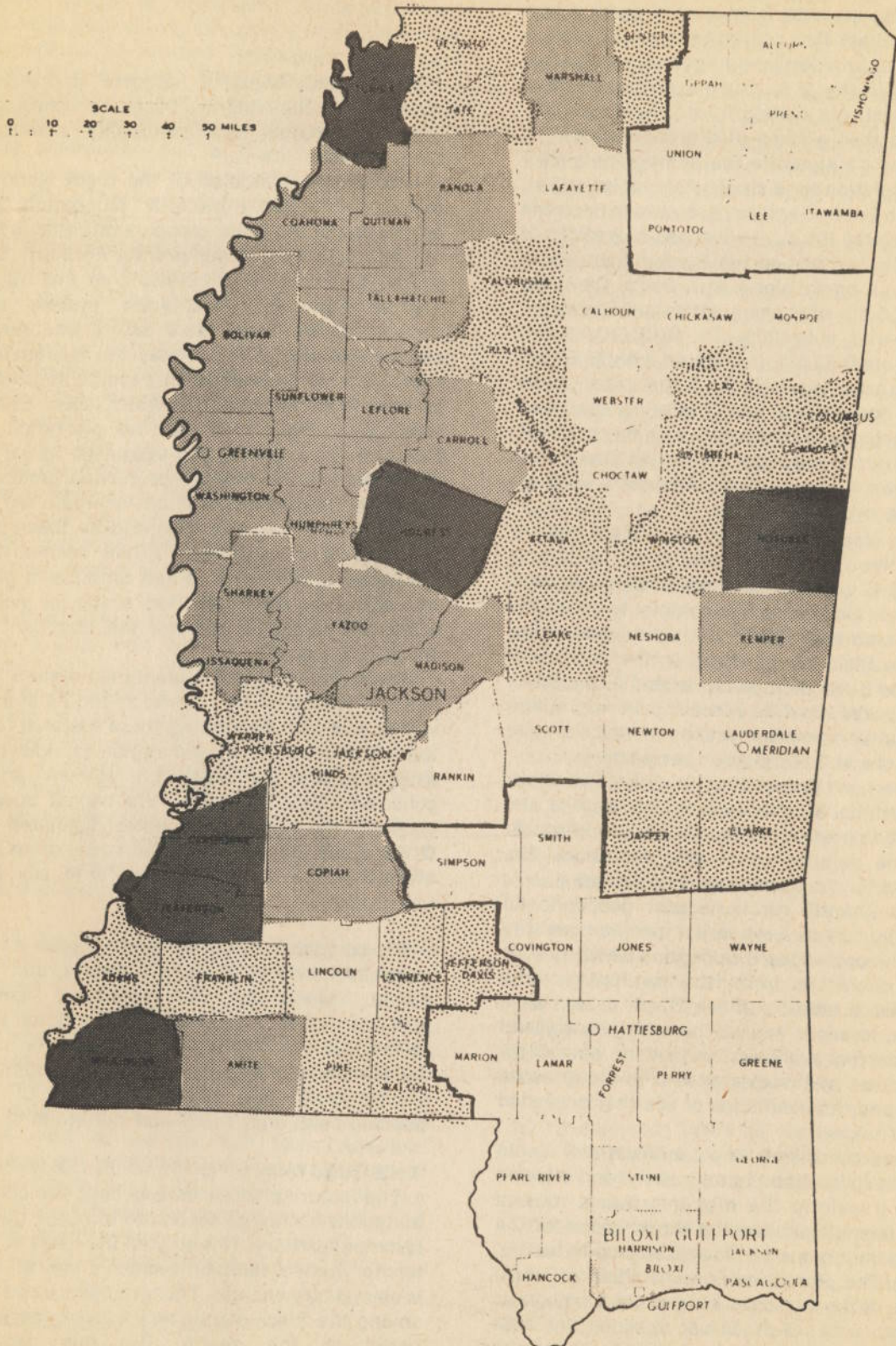


Fig. 14

Furthermore, there has been a decline in the numbers of counties in which there is a Black majority. At the turn of the century nearly 300 of the 470 counties of the Black Belt possessed a Black majority. Today there are 100 such counties. The relative demographic weight of these counties has also declined with the shift from a rural to an urban population. The Black Belt continues to be the area in which there is the broadest and largest concentration of Black people in the U.S., but nevertheless today Black people constitute a minority in the Black Belt, somewhat more than a third of the population.

Figures 13 and 14 illustrate the demographic shift in the Black population for a single state, Mississippi, which along with South Carolina, has always been the state which exhibited the most advanced expression of the characteristic features of the Black nation. Even today Mississippi, again along with South Carolina, remains rural. 55.5% of the population of Mississippi is rural (compared with 80% in 1940). In South Carolina the figure is 52.3% (compared with 75.5% in 1940). The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta has been historically and continues to be the most concentrated area of Black majority in conformity with its character as the "real concentrated super plantation area of the country," to use the phrase of an author of a work on the land tenure system.

While today roughly half of the Black people continue to live in the South (53% including Washington, D.C.), only 18% of the Black population lives in the Black Belt. This is in contrast to 1930, the year of the Comintern resolution, when over three quarters of the Black people lived in the South and over 40% of the Black population resided in the Black Belt. These figures serve to place the import of the Black Belt relative to concentrations of Black people elsewhere in the U.S. in proper perspective.

Through the post World War II years, the Black nation retained its significance as the key to the resolution of the question of Black freedom in the U.S. because of the persistence of the plantation. The historical basis for the transformation of Black people from a predominantly rural, peasant people to an overwhelmingly urban proletarian people was the existence of the oppressed Black nation which in turn derived its character from the plantation. The monopolists were able to utilize Black people as a labor reserve, to super exploit them in industry and erect a ghettoized Northern variant of Jim Crow precisely because of the existence of the oppressed Black nation and the conditions of life that prevailed there.

It was these conditions, the "suffocation" Lenin speaks of, that compelled the migrations and allowed monopoly to transform the migrants into a reserve army of the unemployed and the shock troops for the dirtiest, most dangerous and lowest paying industrial battle fronts. The planter-monopolist alliance, which took the form of the Dixiecrat wing of the Democratic Party aligned with Wall Street reaction in both parties, acted to maintain white supremacy throughout the U.S. and insure that the urban North would not be a promised land but a new sort of hell for the Black people.

The dissolution of the plantation system and with it the oppressed Black nation in the Black Belt do not signal the end to Black oppression. It does mean that the central expression of national oppression is no longer peonage in the Black Belt but rather the super exploitation of the Black worker.

Today the forms of national oppression that developed on the historical basis of the subjugation of the Black nation are thoroughly dominant and consolidated.

The super-exploitation of the Black working class rests on the same material foundation that the oppression of the Black croppers did, that is the drive of imperialism for super-profits. Formerly the main source of these super-profits was the monopolist-planter dominated plantation system with its dependency on Black labor locked into semi-feudal relations of production. Today the monopolists reap these super-profits directly by compelling Black labor to work more for less than white labor. Even in the Black Belt itself, it is not the plantation but the factory and the ghetto that locate the forms of Black oppression. Or in other words the oppression of Black people in the Black Belt is not qualitatively different from the oppression experienced by Black people in the rest of the country. While *remnants* of the plantation system survive and continue to give Black oppression in the Black Belt a special viciousness, these are remnants and not the dominant form of Black oppression.

It was the semi-feudal plantation system that gave the region its economic cohesion and its stability as a nation and with its passing these features have been lost. The economy of the region is now decisively integrated into the larger U.S. economy and has no cohesion apart from this. We cannot speak of an economic community that unites Richmond and New Orleans any more than we can speak of an economic community that unites either city with, say, Boston or Los Angeles.

We could more properly speak of such a community between Lowndes County, Alabama, and Sunflower County, Mississippi, but these rural regions which still possess features of the old plantation system are clearly the Black Belt's past and not its future. And for Marxist-Leninists, as opposed to dogmatists, it is the *future*, the *rising features* of historical development, that forms the determining factor.

THE QUESTION OF ECONOMIC COHESION

The feature of common economic life characteristic of nations cannot be separated from the question of a common territory. It is only on the basis of a common territory that a common economic life can arise. This is elementary enough. There remains a class structure among the Black people and a Black market of sorts based on the ghetto. But this geographically fragmented and peripheral economic life, which is under assault from monopoly, can hardly be equated with a national economic community.

It is of course true that in the case of an oppressed nation the development of national economic cohesion is inevitably retarded by national oppression. Since the material essence of national oppression is the control of the market by the oppressor nation bourgeoisie, the economic community of the oppressed nation is necessarily embryonic and stunted. This was clearly the case in the Black Belt from Reconstruction onward. There were a few Black capitalists who employed Black labor and produced for a Black market. What there was, however, was a Black urban petty bourgeoisie in the cities with capitalist aspirations and a Black peasantry that sought to throw off the yoke of peonage in order to freely develop. These groups provided the basis for a national movement.

These strata had genuinely national aims and an objective stake in the creation of a national market. The key to this was the elimination of the semi-feudal relations of production which bound the peasantry to the plantation and removed it from the market. The Black farmer freed from the cropper system and able to produce freely for the market, and in turn able to provide a market for Black-owned manufacture and services—this was the aim. And it is this that constituted the embryo of economic cohesion. While there was in fact only a limited Black market of free producers and consumers, the logic of national oppression provided the tendency to expand this market in opposition to the white monopoly-planter alliance.

It is in this context that the disintegration of the plantation system and with it the dispersal and proletarianization of the Black population of the Black Belt takes on significance. The virtual disappearance of the Black peasantry and their physical dispersal from the Black Belt spells the end of the possibility of developing a national market and thus economic cohesion. What Stalin said in explaining "the impossibility of preserving the existence of the Jews as a nation" (quote page 87 *Marxism and the National Question*) is largely true in relation to the Afro-American people as well.²⁰

The fact of the matter is primarily that among the Jews there is no large and stable stratum connected with the land, which would naturally rivet the nation together, serving not only as its framework, but also as a "national" market. OF the five or six million Russian Jews, only three to four percent are connected with agriculture in any way. The remaining 96% are employed in trade, industry, in urban institutions, and in general are town dwellers: moreover, they are spread all over Russia and do not constitute a majority in a single gubernia. . . . All this taken together with the increasing re-shuffling of nationalities characteristic of developed forms of capitalism, leads to the assimilation of Jews.²¹

THE ORGANIZERS OF NATIONS

The dissolution of the Black nation in the Black Belt is bound up with the decline of the plantation, the rise of industry and the demographic and class shifts associated with these changes. In applying the

Marxist-Leninist analysis of nationhood to the Black people we do not apply Stalin's criteria in his definition of nations abstractly, that is in isolation from one another and in isolation from the concrete historical development of the Black people. Stalin's definition is a unity and not a collection of disconnected yardsticks that can be readily applied to every nation regardless of the contours of its development. In the case of the Black nation we regard the loss of Black majority as decisive only in the context of the accompanying loss of economic community or more specifically the sundering of the Black people from the land and the disintegration of the plantation system. These two features cannot be separated from each other.

This point is particularly important in relation to those dogmatists who cling to the original Comintern analysis or some distorted form of it and continue to maintain that there is a Black nation in the Black Belt. The method of the dogmatist is to throw dialectics out the window and scurry about searching for arguments for why the Black people "measure up" to each of the respective criteria for nationhood. The unity of Stalin's definition, which saw community of language, territory, economy and culture as *features* of a unified, historically evolved phenomenon, a nation, is cast aside by our bourgeois logicians.

The dogmatists immediately encounter difficulties because they must confront the nasty fact that Black people have not constituted a majority in their territory or historical homeland for nearly forty years and today constitute little more than a third of the population. Their response is to argue that significant areas of Black majority still exist within the Black Belt, pointing to the still significant if shrunken numbers of counties with Black majorities. We are not prepared to say if a contiguous territory with a Black majority could be constructed on the basis of these counties, although an examination of the census leads us to doubt it. The point is that this is an irrelevant scholastic exercise.

A national territory is historically constituted. In the Black Belt the area of Black majority clearly corresponded to the physical and economic features of the plantation region. The Communist International did not arbitrarily carve out an area of Black majority and call it the Black Belt nation. Rather it was the historically evolved features of the area arising out of slavery and the plantation system that marked the boundaries of the Black Belt. But our dogmatists are apparently ready to shift the boundaries of the Black nation every ten years as the census-taker presents them with more counties that must be read out of the "nation" in order to maintain the fiction of a stable Black majority.

Other dogmatists, forced to admit the obvious, agree that there is no Black majority today, but that the Black people as a whole still constitute a nation and the proletarian revolution must reconstitute a Black majority in the Black Belt in order to exercise the right of self determination.

Nationhood thus becomes an increasingly metaphysical concept, divorced from the real development and concrete character of the Black people. The

essentially Bundist nature of this proposal is readily apparent. In speaking of the opportunist idea of cultural national autonomy, Stalin said: "It calls for the organization of nations, but can they be artificially welded if in actual reality, by virtue of economic development, whole groups are torn from them and dispersed over various regions?" Is this not precisely what our dogmatists are proposing? The organization or more properly the reorganization of a nation? And is it not clear that the reconstitution of the Black people as a majority in the Black Belt would be artificial in the sense that it would go firmly against the grain of over a half century of economic development?

Marxist-Leninists firmly oppose national oppression in all forms including the forced, compulsory assimilation of nations. But at the same time, genuine Marxist-Leninists recognize the progressive features of the amalgamation of peoples while opposing the imperialist methods of promoting amalgamation. We do not seek to reverse this trend, but rather eliminate the employment of compulsion. "But," as Stalin put it, "... since when have Social Democrats begun to occupy themselves with 'organizing' nations, 'constituting' nations, 'creating' nations?"²²

The logic of our "organizers of nations" is essentially moral rather than political. Black people today, they argue, have "a right to their historic homeland" because they were "forced" from the land. But Marxist-Leninists do not recognize any principle that says that peoples have a right to their "historic homelands". We recognize the right of real nations to self determination. Nations that have become assimilated, that is, peoples that no longer have the material attributes of nationhood, do not retain, nor do they need, the right to self determination. This is not a matter of denying a people something essential to their liberation. It is simply a recognition that the right of self determination is a demand that corresponds to certain objective situations and is completely irrelevant to others.

Secondly, the conception of the Black Belt South as "an historic homeland" is a misleading notion. It suggests that this region as some special subjective significance to the Afro-American people, comparable to the homeland of disenfranchised nations like the Palestinians. (We will have more to say on the analogy of the Black people and the Palestinians shortly.) In fact, the Black Belt, while it retains a significance in the consciousness of the Black people as the region from which they have migrated, hardly takes on the proportions of "an historic homeland" in the popular Afro-American mind. The ending of national oppression is hardly bound up with the right to this homeland in the thinking of the masses. Nor is this some manifestation of backwardness or lack of "national consciousness." This attitude is, on the contrary, a reflection of the actual objective character of the Black people as a dispersed, largely urban working class people. A nation that has been dissolved and assimilated, not surprisingly, does not think like a nation.

Finally, we must examine the idea that Black people

were "forced" out of the Black Belt. In one sense this was certainly true enough. The whole process of the formation of the modern proletariat by the expropriation of the peasantry, of which the dismembering of the Black nation is one chapter, rests on force. Economic compulsion and physical coercion are employed to divorce the peasant from the means of production, and thus transform that same peasant into a worker who must sell his labor power on a market controlled by the capitalist.

This process was particularly vicious and violent in the Black Belt owing to the existence of national oppression. But it is also important to remember that the force associated with this process was present in the expropriation of small farmers throughout the country including those who suffered no national oppression (the poor whites of the Black Belt, the "Okies" of the plains states, the New England dairy farmers, etc.)

It is in this sense we can say that when a group of people set off voluntarily to seek better conditions of life, we can nevertheless see that "force" is involved, in that the sorry conditions of life they are fleeing were imposed by capitalist development in general and capitalist policies in particular. If this is all that is meant by force we can have no quarrel with it.

But given that this notion of force is bound up with a right to the land the Black people were forced from, it must mean more than that. Our organizers of nations do not demand the land for expropriated farmers who have long ago left it *in general*. No, these "theoreticians" understand that the process of the formation of the modern proletariat by the expropriation of the peasantry was a progressive and irreversible historical development. The employment of force does not prevent them from seeing this. However, their nationalism, their boundless attachment to the idea of the Black nation, prevents them from seeing that for Black people as well this process was both progressive and irreversible.

Does this mean we are indifferent to tenant evictions, Klan terror, bank foreclosures and all the other features of Black Belt peonage? Of course not. It does mean that we recognize not only that the formation of an urban Black proletariat was historically progressive in its political result, but that it also represented a real and generalized improvement in the living conditions of the Black people. In this sense the moving of Black people away from the land was not forced but voluntary. And in fact it is important to recall that in the first wave of migrations the planters sought to force the Black people to remain on the land. The organizers of nations unwittingly sentimentalize the "suffocating prison" that the Black Belt represented with their one-sided, moralistic talk of "force."

It is this moralism that allows our dogmatists to maintain that the agrarian question remains central to Black Liberation today. Their loyalty to the letter but definitely not the spirit of the Comintern resolutions is boundless. It does not matter that there are only 18,000 Black tenant farmers in the south today. Millions of Black people are unemployed because they have been forced off the land. Thus they make the

existence of urban, industrial employment part of an agrarian question. But this will not do. Black unemployment can only be addressed in the framework of who is to own and control the means of production—and the decisive element here is industry and not land.

Forty acres and a mule even given the most modern expression has little to do with the real needs of the Black masses, and for that matter little to do with the "agrarian question" which in the U.S. will be solved by collectivisation of large-scale capitalist farms and not be division of the land among a non-existent peasantry. This task is not a national task with special significance for the Afro-American people. It is an aim of the whole multi-national proletariat. The proletarianization of the Black people, illustrated by the statistic that less than 3% of the Black labor force is involved in agricultural production of any form, means that the "agrarian question" is no longer bound up with the national question but is simply a generalized part of the agenda of a Socialist Revolution.

THE CONCRETE PRESENTATION OF THE QUESTION

"The categorical requirement of Marxist theory in investigating any social question is that it be examined within definite historical limits, and, if it refers to a particular country, . . . that account be taken of the specific features distinguishing that country from others in the same historical epoch."²³ (Lenin) Consistent with this "categorical requirement", we would hold that it would be ahistorical and mechanical to negate a people's claim to nationhood simply because at a certain point they ceased to be a majority in their national territory.

In the case of Palestine, Marxist-Leninists continue to uphold the existence of a Palestinian nation with the right to self-determination in spite of the fact that the Palestinians make up only 12% of the population of their homeland. What are the specific features that lead us to conclude there is a Palestinian nation on the one hand and there is not a Black nation on the other?

The decisive consideration here is the degree of assimilation. The Palestinians have not been for the most part, dispersed or absorbed by another nation. They are concentrated in refugee camps on the periphery of Palestine and have no immediate prospect of being absorbed into the territories and economies of the surrounding Arab states. The demand for the return of Palestine corresponds to their actual position as a disenfranchised people without a homeland. There is no advanced process of economic development that is effecting their amalgamation with other peoples at work in the Gaza strip.

This is in stark contrast to the Black people who have not only been dispersed but to a considerable degree assimilated in the sense of their integration into the economic life of the U.S. as a whole. (By assimilation we are in no way suggesting the elimination of the distinctive features of the Black people, in contrast with the assimilated European peoples in the U.S., that is, racial and national

oppression.) The Black people, for the most part, are dispersed throughout the urban centers of the U.S. where they have developed certain roots and stability corresponding with their economic life. Also their migration, dispersal and urbanization was the product of a whole epoch and is bound up with the whole economic development of U.S. capitalism, a development that is irreversible. On the other hand the Palestinians were expelled from their homeland by a single act of Zionist aggression, an act that can and will be reversed by the anti-imperialist forces without the negation of the economic development of Palestine.

But even in the case of Palestine, we do not say that the Palestinian nation exists outside time, apart from historical development. If over a period of generations, the Palestinian people were assimilated into the surrounding areas, their national life would become increasingly bound up with these nations. If this development went on unchecked a Palestinian nation would disappear and the demand for the historic homeland would take on an increasingly utopian and ultimately reactionary character. This example only serves to underline the importance of a concrete analysis, particularly the examination of the national question in the framework of actual historical development. It also serves to place in proper perspective our attitude on the question of a Black majority.

While it is not beyond the pale of Marxist imagination or even Marxist practice to describe a people as a nation in spite of the loss of a majority in their territory, the necessity of such a majority in order to actually exercise the right of self determination ought to be obvious. The right of self determination means precisely the right of oppressed peoples to form their own state. The notion of the right to self determination as a democratic solution to the national question is inseparable from the rule of the majority. It is a bizarre "consistent democracy" or self determination indeed which can assure self government to an oppressed people only on the basis of the suppression of the non-national majority within the boundaries of the state.

But this is precisely the implication of the position that a people possess the right to self determination regardless of such mundane considerations as whether or not they possess a territory in which they constitute a majority or whether or not they constitute a nation at all. In the case of the Black people, such a majority could only be achieved by relocating large numbers of Black people, the organizing of a nation, or by relocating the whites living in the Black Belt, who have real roots there and a legitimate claim to continue to occupy the region.

In the way of summation, the passing of the plantation system, the migrations and the proletarianization of the Black people including the majority of Black people in the Black Belt have simultaneously led to the disintegration of the Black nation's economic cohesion and the loss of a Black majority in the Black Belt. These developments have been accompanied by a process of assimilation of Black people through their integration into the economic life of the U.S. as a whole. Taken together these features negate the existence of the historic Black nation in the Black Belt.