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When Black America Moved North

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THE PROMISED LAND: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America, by Nicholas Lemann. Knopf, 410 pp., \$ 24.95.

FIVE YEARS AGO Nicholas Lemann, a national correspondent for The Atlantic magazine, published a widely noted two-part essay titled "The Origins of the Underclass." Lemann's argument was extremely blunt if not wholly original: that African-American urban ghettos "have a separate, self-sustaining culture" that reflects "the abrupt disappearance of all traces of bourgeois life in the ghettos and the complete social breakdown that resulted." That "distinctive culture is now the greatest barrier to progress by the black underclass," according to Lemann, and any government program targeting black urban privation ought to have "the goal of wresting people in the ghettos from the grip of the culture" while recognizing "how difficult it will be to heal the ghettos without taking on cultural issues directly."

But there was a second, less dramatic aspect of Lemann's thesis that was actually far more significant. "Every aspect of the underclass culture in the ghettos" of the present day, Lemann argued, "is directly traceable to roots in the South . . . of a generation ago."

Now, in "The Promised Land," Lemann has vastly expanded that second portion of his 1986 analysis while significantly softening much of the language used to state the first part of his case. A reader of "The Promised Land" who is not familiar with Lemann's earlier journalism, however, is unlikely to grasp immediately this book's social-policy goals. Here Lemann presents his argument in the form of a lengthy and sometimes dense description of the complicated individual lives of a handful of African-American families who moved from Clarksdale, Miss., to Chicago in search of better opportunities. Instead, they often found themselves unable to escape from domestic violence, teenage child-bearing, erratic employment, bad public housing and reliance on welfare payments.

Black urban poverty, Lemann contends, is neither inherently nor originally urban. Between 1940 and 1970 over 4 1/2 million black Americans moved from the South to the North - far and away the largest population shift in American history.

Black southerners took the railroads north because of the huge decline in southern agriculture's need for manual labor following the introduction of the mechanical cotton picker and because of the relative racial freedom and better job offerings available in northern cities. Many of those migrants were quite literally right off the farm, with little if any formal education.

Oftentimes they were skilled only in the stoop-labor tasks of hoeing and picking cotton under the economically oppressive conditions of sharecrop plantations.

It was these underprivileged rural migrants, Lemann argues, who created the urban underclass. "The Promised Land" is an elongated description of a perceived linkage that Lemann described more clearly and succinctly back in 1986: "There seems to be a strong correlation between underclass status in the North and a family background in the nascent underclass of the sharecropper South." Indeed, he argued, "the similarities between sharecropping and welfare are eerie: dependency on 'the man'; more money for having more children; little value placed on education; no home ownership; an informal attitude toward marriage and childbearing." In short, "Migration brought the black class system to the North virtually intact."

Some commentators no doubt will castigate Lemann for judgmentally evaluating poorer Americans' lives through such a resolutely middle-class perspective or for simply using the term "underclass." But Lemann is not, within the world of Washington labels, a neo-conservative; instead he is a neo-liberal, someone who is not shy about frankly acknowledging the depth of social problems but who also resolutely believes that extensive government social-welfare programs can solve or ameliorate them.

Lemann devotes a significant middle section of "The Promised Land" to an informative historical survey of 1960s anti-poverty initiatives. His goal is to persuade current-day policymakers that those efforts were programmatically appropriate and failed only because local elected officials were not actively recruited as political allies of federal policies. Because of widespread misunderstanding of what went wrong 25 years ago, Lemann says, "the idea endures that anything the federal government might do for the black poor will surely fail, and it has become a force in its own right." As Lemann warns, "Misapprehensions about the past have a way of determining the future."

While Lemann does offer a perceptive understanding of how the great black northward migration fundamentally expanded the role of race as a major issue in American politics and society, "The Promised Land" is not an especially successful book. The fundamental problems are two-fold. First, much to this reviewer's surprise and disappointment, Lemann fails to convey a sufficiently memorable picture of the Clarksdale-to-Chicago migrants as individual people rather than representative examples. Readers who find themselves unable to remember characters from chapter to chapter are unlikely to remain with Lemann for the full length of his book.

Second, despite his clear desire to have "The Promised Land" alter and improve American political debates about combating urban poverty, Lemann fails to offer any programmatic suggestions that reach beyond the most obvious platitudes. While this will be extremely surprising to anyone familiar with Lemann's 1986 essay, it also will be disappointing to many new readers.

Lemann states that "we should be trying to bring the ghetto poor closer to the social and economic mainstream of American society," and that to do so "the government should be trying to break the hold on individuals of those aspects of the ghetto culture that work against upward mobility." This is hardly meaningful guidance, yet Lemann acknowledges that "any planned undertaking that is to affect the ghettos substantially will have to be of enormous scope."

"The Promised Land" fails to offer any distinctive vision, however. While Lemann at one point contends that "a major expansion of the government's social programs . . . would not be so

expensive," he admits at another juncture that "political support for a concerted effort to help the underclass is not likely to materialize until it is understood as a moral cause." In the end Lemann quite explicitly confesses that this is most unlikely to happen, for "we are insufficiently unified as a society to be able successfully to undertake ambitious, organized national projects of any kind."

While that may indeed be an excessively defeatist commentary on present-day America, it unfortunately captures all too well the ambivalence with which Lemann regards even his own vague inclinations. Regrettably, "The Promised Land" fails to illuminate how we might tackle the growing economic inequality that so deeply troubles American society.

Photo by Russell Lee- Easter, 1941, on Chicago's South Side