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The Excluded:

An Estimate of the Consequences of Denying Social Security to Agricultural and Domestic Workers

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> In every great change in the lives of African Americans we see the hand of events that were beyond our control, events that were not unalloyed goods. You cannot disconnect our emancipation in the Northern colonies from the blood spilled in the Revolutionary War, any more than you can disconnect our emancipation from slavery in the South from the charnel houses of the Civil War, any more than you can disconnect our emancipation from Jim Crow from the genocides of the Second World War. History is not solely in our hands.
>
> —Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Historians hold that a great arc of social justice was constructed in 1935 with passage of the Social Security Act, which established the American welfare state (Schlesinger, 1986).[1] Although the nation's social infrastructure would fail to replicate the universalism of the Scandinavian countries, it would nonetheless afford unprecedented securities for the unemployed, the elderly, the poor, the homeless, the ill, the disabled, and the victims of discrimination. Through social insurance and public assistance programs, its protections not only expanded in the mid-20th century but also held fast when challenged by conservatives in the decades after 1980. Liberals championed their welfare state, however inadequate and inelegant, as essential for achieving a fair and equitable society.

Conveniently elided, then, was the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from the original provisions of Social Security, occupational groups that were disproportionately minorities of color. For divergent reasons—racial politics or administrative efficiency—more than 15 million of American workers, almost one third of the labor force, were denied a public pension, effectively consigned to working for any wage available until they were no longer able. While the penury of low-skilled labor can be monetized, related effects on health and education mark this as a complement to the nation's sad legacy of discrimination due to class, race, and ethnicity. Notably, an accounting of this moral failure has yet to be made.

The Context

Slavery and Reconstruction provide the backstory to excluding agricultural and domestic workers from Social Security. Monoculture accounted for the rise of King Cotton in the South prior to the Civil War, with the plantation functioning as a rural factory. Cultivation of cotton provided the exports that accelerated not only the industrialization of the North, but international trade with Great Britain as well.

[1] A welfare state "held that individuals belonging to a defined community (typically a national community) were entitled, through their status as citizens, to a range of social goods guaranteed by the central state designed to meet their basic needs (food, shelter, education, health, etc.)" (Ellison, 2006, p. 408). The centrality of the federal government in the welfare state was noted by Judt (2010, p. 74).

"The returns from cotton monopoly powered the modernization of the rest of the American economy, and by the time of the Civil War, the United States had become the second nation to undergo large-scale industrialization" (Baptist, 2014, p. xxi). The capital from cotton exports, which were produced from slave labor, became essential to and were intertwined with the modernization of the American economy.

In 1860, four million slaves were reported in the United States, half of them in the South (Franklin, 1980, p. 133). The degradation and brutality of slavery, poignantly reported by freedmen like Frederick Douglass (1994), fueled an Abolitionist Movement, which before Appomattox convinced Congress to create the Freedman's Bureau to reestablish emancipated slaves as rural landowners in their own right, independent of the plantation system. The brief tenure of the Freedman's Bureau, 1865 to 1872, foretold the demise of Reconstruction, the withdrawal of federal troops signaling the resurgence of an aristocracy willing to employ poor Whites to reassert their antebellum prerogatives. The 1873 massacre of 150 Republican freedmen in Colfax, Louisiana, symbolized the rise of Jim Crow (Keith, 2008). Episodic violence soon punctuated the systematic exclusion of Negroes from the polity through newly drafted state constitutions.

By century's end, Jim Crow strode the breadth of the South, reducing Negroes to serfs dependent on agriculture controlled by owners of large farms or overseers employed by Eastern companies. In the early decades of the 20th century, the vast majority of Negroes in the South were peons, making the most of their dependency on a cash economy that was not only unpredictable due to the seasons but also exploitive as employers used illiteracy and subjugation to cheat them of earnings. In the Mississippi delta, Negro families moved from farms to villages after harvesting then back again for planting, often living on a plantation for no longer than 3 years before moving to another in search of more favorable working conditions. At best, Southern peasants aspired to abandon the meager income of sharecropping to become tenant farmers. The portrait that emerges from rural life for Negroes of the period is feudal compared to the industrialization that was transforming other regions of America.

Most fieldwork in the South at that time was done by sharecroppers who were completely dependent on landowners for shelter, implements, and credit; a fortunate few were tenants who owned the tools and livestock necessary to work the land but still rented housing on plantations.

> The cotton year begins in March at planting time. To tenants the owner usually advances about ten dollars a month from this time on, for the five or six months until the crop is made and the cotton ginned. The cropper must cut old stalks, plow, plant, harrow, chop (with a hoe between the rows), pick cotton, and haul it into [Indianola, Mississippi] to be ginned. He then receives (even the dishonest planters allow) the money for the pressed seed ($32 per ton this year). The tenant gets credit also for his half of the price of the cotton bale ($37.50 at present prices) to apply on what he owes the owner. As soon as his debt is paid off, he can keep the proceeds as the cotton is sold, bale by bale. In addition to the fifty dollars or so which may have been advanced for food, the owner may have paid for medical services. It is expected that a cropper will have enough left at the end of the season to carry him to the following March when he may expect another month's "furnish." (Dollard, 1937, pp. 109–110)

Sharecropping and its tenant-farming cousin offered a marginal living at best. When harvests were good, the landlord and laborer shared equally in profits, minus expenses incurred by the latter. Negroes were at the mercy of landowners who often advanced credit at plantation stores then subtracted expenses before a final settling for the season, a written accounting deemed unnecessary due to farm workers' illiteracy. Literate sharecroppers bore the indignity of being cheated out of income stoically or having little recourse other than moving to another plantation. Wage theft was a norm during the early 1930s:

> Not more than twenty-five or thirty per cent of the sharecroppers get an honest settlement at the end of their five months of labor. For the year 1932, approximately seventeen or eighteen per cent of the tenants received some profit, averaging from $30 to $150. The remainder either broke even or were left in debt to the landlord (Powdermaker, 1939, pp. 86–87).

Inherently exploitative, the plantation system ironically perfected noblesse oblige among the Bourbon aristocracy. The condescension of educated planters is evident in William Alexander Percy's memoir describing Trail Lake plantation in Mississippi.

> Our plantation system seems to me to offer as humane, just, self-respecting, and cheerful a method of earning a living as human beings are likely to devise. I watch the limber-jointed, oily-black, well-fed, decently clothed peasants on Trail Lake and feel sorry for the telephone girls, the clerks in chain stores, the office help, the unskilled laborers everywhere—not only for their poor and fixed wage but for their slave routine, their joyless habits of work, and their insecurity. (Percy, 1941, p. 280)[2]

Adopting an enthusiasm from the Progressive Era, Percy likened sharecropping to "profit-sharing" (p. 278).

Well into the Great Depression, the South fared far worse than the rest of the country. While income averaged $604 nationally in 1937, in the South it was $314. Tenant farmers accounted for 53% of farm families and reported even lower incomes, while sharecroppers earned as little as $38 a year, or $0.10 a day (National Emergency Council, 1938). The iconic sharecropper shack, absent running water, door akimbo, windows without screens, and without insulation, accounted for 1.5 million substandard houses in the South (1938). Three fourths of Southern children aged 10 to 15 worked. Large landowners controlled agriculture in the South, forcing "more than half of the South's farmers into the status of tenants, tilling land they do not own. Whites and Negroes have suffered alike. Of the 1,831,000 tenant families in the region, about 66 percent are White. Approximately half of the sharecroppers are White, living under economic conditions almost identical with those of Negro sharecroppers" (1938, p. 46).

Owning draft animals and equipment, White tenant farmers enjoyed a marginal advantage over Negro sharecroppers who had to rely on landowners for livestock and implements to work the land, but their circumstances remained marginal. With respect to modern conveniences and appliances, the rural South not only lagged far behind urban America but rural America as well, as shown in Table 1.

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[2] In retrospect, Percy's rationalization is repulsive, yet his conduct was a product of his era. When his nephew, Walker Percy, and his two siblings were left homeless due to the suicide of their parents, William Percy gave up a bon vivant lifestyle to adopt and care for them. A Harvard Law School graduate, World War I veteran, and published poet, William Percy was undoubtedly gay, a negative attribution in the South of that period. It is doubtful that Walker Percy would have become a noted figure in American letters had not his uncle made such a personal sacrifice. Nor was William Percy deaf to the circumstances of Negroes. During the devastating flood of 1927, which left the Delta under 10 feet of water, Percy served as coordinator of Red Cross relief. In that capacity, he advocated moving 7,500 Negroes off levee encampments and transporting them to higher ground at Vicksburg, only to have his efforts sabotaged by his father, U.S. Senator LeRoy Percy, who feared that, had Negroes been evacuated, they would never have returned, leaving plantations without essential field workers.

Table 1. Percentages of Housing with Modern Conveniences, by Location and Type, 1940

Convenience	Urban	Rural	Rural South
Electric lighting	95.8	31.3	16.4
Mechanical refrigeration	56.0	14.9	9.6
Running water	93.5	17.8	8.5
Flush toilet	83.0	11.2	4.7
Private bath or shower	77.5	11.8	5.4
Central heating	57.9	10.1	1.3

Adapted from *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living since the Civil War* (p. 120), by Robert Gordon, 2016, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

The absence of refrigeration, running water, and toilets was particularly debilitating for farm families in the South since their absence invited spoilage, contamination, and disease. "The low-income belt of the South is a belt of sickness, misery, and unnecessary death," reported the National Emergency Council in 1938 (p. 29), with the population susceptible to pneumonia, tuberculosis, and malaria. Morbidity and mortality were associated with poor diet; unable to buy and store fruits and vegetables, poor farmers lived on meals of fried pork, corn cakes, and molasses. Direct exposure of farm workers and their children to manure and urine of mules, pigs, and dogs further compromised their health.

Poverty combined with a temperate climate meant that many sharecroppers were often barefoot, making them susceptible to hookworm, which was endemic in the South. A parasite that infects mammals through feces in damp earth, hookworm saps strength in adults and causes retardation in children; 40% of school children in Mississippi were infected by a parasite that could have been eradicated by simply building privies and wearing shoes. Much of the lethargy associated with Negroes in the rural South could be attributed to hookworm infestation. With regard to contagious disease infecting Negroes, the U.S. government offered little assistance. Hookworm eradication began in 1909 with a $1 million grant from a private philanthropy, the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission (Hookworm Infection, n.d.).

Not only was the federal government indifferent to treating Negroes for parasites, it was actively engaged in iatrogenic experiments on Blacks. The notorious syphilis "experiment" undertaken from 1932 to 1972 by the U.S. Public Health Service in Tuskegee, Alabama, through which public health officials observed the progression of disease among infected Black men while withholding treatment, would become emblematic of what would later be known as institutional racism (Jones, 1981). The failure of the U.S. Public Health Service is underscored by the prevalence of syphilis in the Negro population in one Southern county at the time, estimated at 35% (Lemann, 1991, p. 29).

Beyond high levels of morbidity, the mortality of Negroes far exceeded that of Whites. In 1935, life expectancy of White males was 61.0 years and for White females 65.0 years, while that of "Blacks and others" was 51.3 years and 55.2 years, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999, p. 874.). Longevity of minorities of color was almost a decade shorter than that of Whites; for Black sharecroppers, life would have been even shorter.

The Excluded

So organized, the rural South would prove a poor candidate for the introduction of a government pension program that was predicated on industrialization. Indeed, the Southern aristocracy railed against the intrusion of Washington into its prerogatives, as had Percy: "One day I read that the

President of the United States [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] had excoriated bitterly and sorrowfully 'the infamous sharecropper system,'" then waxing indignant, stated:

> Though rightly considered a bore and a pest in the best Trojan circles, Cassandra, no doubt, had her fun, but, at that, not nearly so much as the Knights of the Bleeding Heart who in politics and literature years from now will still be finding it fetching and inexpensive to do some of their poignant public heart-bleeding over the poor downtrodden share-croppers of the deep South. (Percy, 1941, pp. 280–281, 282)

In addressing the plight of destitute workers, the evolving concept of social security included several provisions, although, notably, health care was not among them. Because of widespread joblessness, Unemployment Insurance was included to tide the unemployed for a fixed period until they could find work; Social Security provided a public pension for retirees; and public assistance addressed the circumstances of the poor who were elderly, disabled, and blind, as well as dependent children. Two features would bedevil the Social Security Act as passed in 1935: First, Social Security would exclude a long list of workers, including agricultural and domestic workers; moreover, Unemployment Insurance and public assistance programs were managed by states, assuring them latitude in not only determining eligibility for benefits but the amount of aid as well (Katznelson, 2013, pp. 386–387). As a result, disproportionately large numbers of African Americans and Latinos were either denied assistance or received minimal aid; presumably poor Whites were either too proud to seek relief or held in even lower esteem than Negroes.[3]

The exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers would become an issue in the history of the Social Security Act with two explanations becoming central. Initially, historians attributed the exclusion of low-wage workers to Southern employers who demanded a docile labor force and pitted Blacks against Whites in competition for low wage work. "The primary motive, emanating particularly from Southern politicians, who monopolized crucial [Congressional] committee chairmanships, was to protect employers' access to the primarily Black but also Latino agricultural and domestic labor force in the South and Southwest" (Gordon, 1994, p. 275). The control by antebellum plantation owners over Black workers was thus extended, post-Reconstruction, through provisions of the Social Security Act, concessions that were maneuvered through Congressional seniority and control over legislation during the New Deal: "White Southerners, and especially plantation elites, fashioned a politics that was concerned simultaneously with advancing regional interests against [a national economic] dominant class and with protecting their distinctive racial civilization" (Katznelson, 2013, p. 170). Accordingly, the celebrated African American historian John Hope Franklin observed:

> When the Social Security Board was established in 1935, provisions were made for old age assistance and unemployment benefits in a large number of categories. Since agricultural and domestic workers were excluded, however, a tremendous proportion of the Negro population failed to qualify for the benefits provided by the act. Even in the program of old age

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[3] "Intellectually and spiritually [poor Whites] are inferior to the Negro, whom they hate. Suspecting secretly they are inferior to him, they must do something to him to provide to themselves their superiority. At their door must be laid the disgraceful riots and lynchings gloated over and exaggerated by Negrophiles the world over," Percy lamented. "The river folk do not like White tenants or 'red-neck' neighbors. When these shall have supplanted the Negro, ours will be a sadder country, and not a wiser one." (1941, pp. 20, 21)

> assistance, there was a tendency to grant lower sums, especially in the South to aged Blacks than to aged Whites. (1980, p. 396)

One historian calculated that "more than three-fifths of Black workers, those employed in agricultural labor or domestic service, were excluded from coverage" (Quadagno, 1994, p. 157), while another put the figure at "two-thirds of employed Blacks" (Katz, 1986, p. 244).

In this regard, the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers reflected a tradition of American social welfare: deference to embedded, popular preferences even when collective remedies might be available to support the most vulnerable (Epstein, 2010). Denied a public pension, low-wage workers who became destitute were consigned to state operated public assistance—or welfare—that was, for all practical purposes, nonexistent. The systemic inadequacy of social programs complemented a pervasive poverty, which was only deepened by the Great Depression; in 1935, 59% of families had incomes of less than $1,250 for the year (Hofstadter, 1973, p. 441). Adding race to the equation, however, reinforced a caste system that was particular to the South. "The political institution that paralleled sharecropping was segregation," noted Nicholas Lemann (1991, p. 6), "Blacks in the South were denied social equality from Emancipation onward, and, beginning in the 1890s, they were denied the ordinarily legal rights of American citizens as well."

What benefits the minority poor might have received were paltry. Before 1935, many states had established mother's pension programs; however, benefits in the South fell far below those of the North. In 1931, family benefits in Arkansas were $4.33 per month compared to $69.31 in Massachusetts (Skocpol, 1992, p. 472). By 1939, benefits in Arkansas were $8.10 per month, while those in Massachusetts were $61.07 (Piven & Cloward, 1971, p. 116). In the South, state-determined benefits were not only meager, but also seasonal: During the spring planting, summer hoeing, and fall harvesting, benefits were discontinued, the presumption being that work was available in the fields, easily enforced on defenseless Negroes (Piven & Cloward, 1994, chap. 4).

A contrary argument was that labor in the preindustrial South and Southwest was simply inadequately developed for Social Security to induct workers into a public pension program. Indeed, workers' compensation laws, which had been established in 45 states between 1911 and 1920 and were supported by labor leaders, such as Samuel Gompers, had typically excluded farm and domestic workers from coverage (Berkowitz & McQuaid, 1980, p. 36). Accordingly, J. Douglas Brown, a member of the Committee on Economic Security (CES) that drafted the Social Security Act, would recall that agricultural and domestic workers were omitted initially but that "the coverage of farm employees and domestic workers should begin as soon as administratively possible" (Brown, 1977, p. 12). Once workers in manufacturing and commerce were included, agricultural and domestic workers would be enrolled, as would be the case with the amendments of 1950 and 1954 (DeWitt, 2010b, p. 5). Thus, the nature of farm work was the primary justification for excluding agricultural and domestic workers. Arthur Altmeyer, an early Social Security administrator, recalled:

> We were smart enough politically to know there was no chance of covering farmers to begin with. They had been excluded traditionally from all forms of regulatory legislation, particularly workmen's compensation even to this day. No, they're the last stronghold of individualism, reactionism, independence—whatever you want to call it. (quoted in DeWitt, 2010a, p. 5)

The presumption that industrialized workers would benefit from a government pension was a logical extension of "welfare capitalism" as it evolved during the Progressive Era. Gerard Swope, a proponent of welfare capitalism, advocated an array of benefits, including life and disability insurance as well as unemployment and retirement payments, but insisted that these be provided by "industrial trade associations" not the federal government (Berkowitz & McQuaid, 1980, p. 83). Ultimately, the social insurance programs incorporated in the Social Security would complement private benefits provided by industry, not compete with arrangements that were favored by corporations and endorsed by collective bargaining agreements negotiated with unions.

Initially, the CES, a panel of New Deal experts, advocated inclusion of all occupational groups to make provisions of the Social Security Act as broad as possible. Harry Hopkins, head of the Works Progress Administration, and Frances Perkins, secretary of labor, lobbied for including agricultural and domestic workers, acknowledging their marginal economic status. Indeed, the CES's final report excluded only three occupational groups: white collar employees making over $250 per month, government employees, and railroad workers. Presented to Congress in January 1935, the House Ways and Means Committee convened hearings on the CES plan only to encounter unexpected resistance. Unbidden, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau voiced concerns by the Chamber of Commerce to the effect that specific occupational groups—agricultural, domestic, and casual workers—presented prohibitive problems in enrollment and should be dropped (Davis, 1979, pp. 459–461). Subsequently, the Senate Finance Committee concurred with the exclusion of workers deemed problematic with respect to collecting a withholding tax. Initially objecting to the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers, Perkins would relent, figuring that these groups could be incorporated into Social Security at a later date (Witte, 1963, pp. 152–153). Ironically, the only witness speaking out in Congressional hearings *against* the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers was Charles Houston, a NAACP official, who preferred a universal, noncontributory welfare benefit (DeWitt, 2010a, pp. 8–11).

Regardless of rationale—race or efficiency—the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from Social Security reinforced the semblance of a caste system of labor in the South and Southwest. Absent a government safety net, minority workers had to work at any wage available, until they dropped. The Social Security Act thus deferred to regional officials who preferred a status quo Jim Crow to a modern welfare state, as did much of the nation. Of utmost concern to Southern officials was the prospect that federal programs would "change the racial situation" with regard to White employers and Black workers. "A truly national labor system threatened to erode the ability of plantations to hold on to low-paid field-workers" (Katznelson, 2013, p. 385).

The Estimate

The exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from Social Security reinforced bias with respect to class, race, and ethnicity in social policy. Clearly, the nature of work in the rural South and Southwest presents a formidable obstacle to any accounting; however, the magnitude of benefit denial justifies the effort. A primary difficulty is calculating a wage against which a withholding tax would be assessed. For employers who filed federal and state taxes this would not be especially difficult, but agricultural and domestic workers were part of a cash economy that was not only fluid but also capricious insofar as employers frequently cheated employees of earnings. With the "furnish" advanced at the beginning of the season and expenses for food, seeds, shelter, and doctor visits informally charged against earnings, sometimes with credit at usurious rates and with no written account, any estimate is likely to encounter error.

Table 2. The Excluded, by Occupational Categories and Race, 1933

Occupational Category	White	Negro	Other	Total
Agriculture	8,192,181	1,987,839	291,978	10,471,998
Domestic	3,268,725	1,576,205	197,521	5,042,451
Total excluded	11,460,906	3,564,044	489,499	15,514,449
Percent excluded	74	23	3	100
All workers	42,484,497	5,503,535	741,888	48,829,920
The Excluded as percent of all workers	27	65	66	

Note. Adapted from "The Decision to Exclude Agricultural and Domestic Workers from the 1935 Social Security Act," by Larry DeWitt, 2010, *Social Security Bulletin, 70*, no. 4, p. 53.

Fortunately, some plantation owners maintained records that are suggestive of wages for agricultural and domestic workers. The ambiguity of the problem is captured by Percy's description of Trail Lake:

> Trail Lake has a net acreage of 3,343.12 acres of which 1,833.06 acres planted in cotton, 50.59 are given to pasture, 52.44 to gardens, and the rest to corn and hay. The place is worked by 149 families of Negroes (589 individuals) and in 1936 yielded 1,542 bales of cotton. One hundred and twenty-four families work under [father's] old contract, and twenty-five, who own their stock and equipment, under a similar contract which differs from the other only in giving three-fourths instead of one-half of the yield to the tenant. The plantation paid in taxes of all kinds $20,459.99, a bit better than $6.00 per acre; in payrolls for plantation work $12,584.66—nearly $4.00 an acre. These payrolls went to the Negroes on the place. The 124 families without stock of their own made a gross average income of $491.90 and a net average income of $437.64. (Percy, 1941, p. 279)

Field workers labored about 150 days each year; considering Percy's relatively humane stewardship, some of Trial Lake's Negroes likely supplemented their income during winter by migrating to Greenville, although he kept no records to that effect. Percy records that his employees received "free water and fuel, free garden plot and pasturage, a monthly credit for six months to cover food and clothing, a credit for doctor's bills and medicine, and a house to live in" but attaches no figures in amount or interest (Percy, 1941, pp. 281–282).

Initially, Social Security included a withholding tax of 1% on the first $3,000 of income; so, had Negroes at Trail Lake been covered, each head of household would have contributed $4.37 for 1936. Doubtless, this small amount would have been a substantial burden given their paltry earnings; however, as social insurance, Social Security was mandatory, its proponents contending that these forced contributions would be well repaid upon retirement. The estimate of the fiscal consequences of exclusion, then, rests with what benefits might have been.

Retrospectively, the Social Security Administration has calculated the number of excluded workers, indicated in Table 2.

Immediately evident is the disproportionate representation of minorities of color among the excluded; while Negroes and other minorities represented 23% and 3% respectively of those excluded from Social Security, they comprised a far higher proportion—65% and 66% respectively—of those excluded from Social Security compared to Whites.

Any calculation of the value of denied benefits encounters a fundamental change in Social Security, as it was initially conceived as a pension program requiring vesting and the transition to advancing

Table 3. Estimate of Denied Benefits to Excluded Agricultural and Domestic Workers

Factor	White	Negro	Other
Number, 1933	11,460,906	3,564,044	489,499
1937–1940 @ $58.07 per year	$1.997 billion	$0.621 billion	$0.085 billion
1940–1952 @ $240.00 per year	$33.01 billion	$10.26 billion	$1.04 billion
Subtotal vesting and advanced benefits	$35.01 billion	$10.88 billion	$1.12 billion
2016 dollars	$460.80 billion	$143.20 billion	$14.74 billion

benefits, pay-as-you-go, predicated on contributions of current workers to payments to retirees. The consequences are striking. The first beneficiary under the initial vesting structure was a Cleveland streetcar motorman who, having worked one day for $5.00 and contributed $0.05 to Social Security, received a single benefit check for $0.17. The first beneficiary of the subsequent advanced payment structure was a Ludlow, Vermont, legal secretary who received a monthly check of $22.54 beginning January 31, 1940 (DeWitt, 2010b, p. 7).

The vesting period from 1937 through 1939 provided 441,745 beneficiaries with a total of $25,652,000 in benefits, or $58.07 per year for that brief period. Subsequently, a monthly benefit would have been paid, the amount calculated according to a formula that advantaged low-wage workers over their higher earning compatriots. The vast majority of agricultural and domestic workers would have been eligible for the minimum Social Security benefit of $20.00 per month, had they been included (Cohen & Myers, 1950, p. 4). Assuming the excluded numbers in Table 2 and accounting for the differences in payments as per vesting from 1937 to 1940 and averaging the period when excluded agricultural and domestic workers were included under amendments of 1950 and 1954, an estimate of the value of denied benefits is possible, displayed in Table 3. The total value of benefits for excluded agricultural and domestic workers totals $618.24 billion in 2016 dollars, not an insignificant figure.[4]

With amendments to the Social Security Act in 1950 and 1954, millions of previously excluded workers were inducted into the government pension program (Marquis, 1955). Even though large numbers of agricultural and domestic workers were included under Social Security through the 1954 amendments, subsets of workers continued to be excluded and those were likely to be disproportionately minorities of color. For example, while cotton gin workers were included, turpentine workers and Mexican contract workers continue to be excluded. Migrant workers, in particular, were often unable to access benefits from governmental social welfare programs, their circumstances mirroring agricultural workers before the amendments of 1950 and 1954. A meeting of state welfare officials convened by the Social Security Administration reported that migrant families often lived in abandoned buildings, their children several years behind peers in school, and without health care (Berman, 1954, p. 9).[5] In addition, a home worker "who buys raw materials and

[4] These calculations are based on several assumptions, not least of which is a stable population through the period under investigation. In addition, some excluded workers may have received more than the minimum benefit of $20.00 per month, which was based on previous earnings of $20.00 to $25.00 per month, possible for tenant farmers as well as those who migrated off-season to towns to augment earnings. Moreover, a high mortality rate would have made beneficiaries and dependents eligible for survivors' benefits. Clarification on these factors awaits further research.
[5] Perversely, undocumented workers have long subsidized Social Security, a program from which they are unlikely to draw benefits. A journalist reported that a few months after Woolworth's marketed a wallet with a phony Social Security card in the 1970s, 33,000 payments were made into the account with a bogus number (Conover, 1987, p. 207). Annually,

makes and completes any article and sells the same to any person, even though it is made according to specifications and requirements of some single purchaser, continues to be excluded from coverage as an employee" (Cohen, Ball, & Myers, 1954, pp. 4, 6). In other words, workers who were not integrated into a modern labor force continued to be excluded, and these were often minorities of color.

Although problems enrolling farm workers and domestics may have loomed large in the early years of Social Security, this is not a convincing explanation for their exclusion from a government pension. After all, these groups *were* folded into Social Security during the early 1950s when the South had not changed appreciably with regard to the nature of low-wage work. Indeed, the *Social Security Bulletin* reported in 1939 that several European nations—Great Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, and Austria—had encountered similar problems in enrolling farm workers yet had contrived creative ways to enhance the economic security of their farm workers (Blaisdell, 1938). In other words, had not Treasury Secretary Morgenthau expressed objections by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and its concerns for employer prerogatives, these excluded groups would have likely been enrolled in the initial cohort of covered workers.

The Aftermath

The millions of workers excluded from Social Security would haunt future social policy. Having struggled through the Depression, many laborers found themselves redundant due to the mechanization of agriculture. Whether in the form of the cotton picker of the delta or the tractor powered by an internal combustion engine that became a fixture in American agriculture, millions of laborers were no longer necessary on farms that predominated in the South and Southwest. While sharecroppers were quickly dispossessed, tenant farmers, unable to access credit to purchase the equipment essential to plant and harvest crops, were similarly unnecessary. Denied Social Security benefits and finding welfare assistance minimal, if available at all, millions of rural workers sought work elsewhere, the urgency of their search in large measure by government design. Harassed by Jim Crow, Negroes fled to cities of the North—Chicago, New York City, Detroit—the Black Diaspora populating Black ghettoes, while Whites often moved West, chronicled by John Steinbeck's (1939) novel *The Grapes of Wrath,* which won the National Book Award as well as a Pulitzer Prize.

The circumstances of Black families migrating North would have been intimately familiar to a lad from an Irish family in New York City during the 1940s. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's father had abandoned the family, leaving his mother to scrape together earnings from teaching at a women's correctional institution, working as a nurse, and, occasionally public assistance. The family's frequent moves included slums, such as Hells Kitchen, until the young Moynihan took advantage of the GI Bill and became a student of public policy. Receiving a master's degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and a doctorate from the London School of Economics, Moynihan's focus was on labor policy. Inserting himself in New York City politics, Moynihan sought a position in the new Johnson administration, where he hoped to expand job opportunities through the War on Poverty. As an assistant in the Labor Department, Moynihan sought to leverage social policy in order to preempt a burgeoning Civil Rights Movement that had become associated

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undocumented workers are paying $13 billion in withholding taxes but receiving only $1 billion in benefits, a subsidy of $12 billion, or $100 billion over the past decade (Germano, 2014).

with urban riots. At the same time Moynihan wanted to position himself for a run for president of the City Council of New York (Patterson, 2010).

In March 1965, 100 copies of *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* were printed, without authorship, and distributed surreptitiously within the Johnson administration. By the summer of 1965, the "Moynihan Report" was provoking debate within the administration as well as academic circles due to its focus on the disorganization of African American family life as a cause of persistent poverty. Illegitimacy, crime, and alcoholism subverted normal family life; conspicuously absent was a father figure to discipline children, particularly boys. Absent discipline necessary to navigate a way out of poverty, poor Black families produced irresponsible young men who had little education and limited job prospects and young women who sought welfare to sustain their families. Replicating family disorganization attributed to slavery, Moynihan worried about generational poverty distinguishing Black families from the American mainstream (Moynihan, 1965).

The Moynihan Report generated a firestorm, inflaming liberals while animating conservatives who had long been skeptical about welfare. Liberal critics accused Moynihan of blaming African American mothers for their poverty. Moreover, even though he cited contemporary data to substantiate his argument, liberals noted that Moynihan neglected to propose solutions. Conservatives found validation in Moynihan's analysis, later configuring "behavioral poverty" subsidized by government welfare programs in perverse synergy. During the 1980s, conservative intellectuals would inveigh against government welfare, George Gilder (1981, p. 118) stating the poor needed "the spur of their own poverty," and Charles Murray (1984) advocating the termination of all government supports for welfare recipients of working age. Ultimately, Lawrence Mead (1986) would propose a "new paternalism" through which government would deny benefits to poor women who refused to work and had children out of wedlock in order to integrate them into the mainstream. Together, these would be harbingers of the welfare reform debate of the mid-1990s.

Conspicuously absent in Moynihan's monograph is any recognition of the role played by excluding almost one third of low-wage workers from provisions of the Social Security Act during its early years: Social Security, Unemployment Compensation, and for all practical purposes public assistance.[6] The third part of the Moynihan Report, "The Roots of the Problem," included the matriarchal family that evolved from slavery, the emasculation of Black males with Jim Crow, then skipped forward to the disorganized Black family in urban ghettoes, which was attributed to high levels of Black unemployment, especially among young men. A striking omission for a labor scholar, Moynihan failed to acknowledge how government's refusal to support low-wage workers contributed to economic desperation, evident in family disorganization. Ultimately, ignorance of the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from Social Security would place liberals on the defensive, struggling to refute conservative critics of welfare, who contended that imprudent behavior was the cause of minority poverty. Had he been better informed, Moynihan could have charted a more compassionate course for public policy, recognizing that low-income, minority households, having been excluded from social program supports, included workers who were left to fend for themselves in a Darwinian labor market. As a result, the default in welfare reform would be a disciplinary regime that targeted wayward mothers and excluded fathers.

[6] Moynihan's omission regarding the excluding of agricultural and domestic workers from a public pension would be followed by major writers on poverty, including Nicholas Lemann (1991), William Julius Wilson (1996), and Jason DeParle (2004).

The irony of the Moynihan Report was that its author, elected to the U.S. Senate, would find himself disagreeing with a Democratic president about welfare reform during the 1990s. Himself a product of a low-income, disorganized home, Bill Clinton would become a Rhodes scholar and, after losing the governorship of Arkansas in 1978, regained it in 1982 and served for a decade until his election as president in 1992. During Clinton's governorship, Ronald Reagan pioneered welfare reform, convincing Congress to pass the Family Support Act in 1988. While the outcomes of Reagan's welfare reform would be disappointing for conservatives, the waivers granted to states induced them to experiment with alternatives to the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the family welfare entitlement.

An ambitious politician, Clinton sought a welfare reform waiver from the Reagan administration and subsequently established Arkansas WORKS, a mandatory welfare-to-work program. An evaluation of Arkansas WORKS revealed that it cost $118 per recipient, which was recovered by reduced expenditures for AFDC of $167.67 annually for each participant during the first 3 years of the program. Notably, AFDC recipients benefited only $242.33 in increased earnings annually about $0.12 per hour, hardly enough to become self-sufficient (Gueron & Pauly, 1991). But the savings to government, multiplied by the number of AFDC families, 20,000 in 1988 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004), yields $3.5 million in savings, half of which would be credited to the State of Arkansas, a tidy sum for a small state. Compared to other state welfare-to-work programs, Arkansas WORKS performed better with respect to government benefit reductions as well as increased earnings, minimal as those would be, leading Governor Clinton to conclude that welfare reform was a winner. Presidential candidate Clinton would include in his platform "ending welfare as we know it."

In the debate leading to passage of the 1996 welfare reform law, President Clinton encountered an indignant Senator Moynihan who objected to altering AFDC in line with a Republican plan, which included converting the entitlement to a discretionary program, devolving it to the states, and establishing a lifetime cap on receipt of benefits. Clinton, however, realized the benefits of Arkansas WORKS and was on the cusp of a reelection campaign, so he signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, effectively ending the family cash entitlement and securing reelection. By social policy standards, the consequences were profound: Caseloads crashed. Between 1994 and 2002, caseloads plummeted, especially in the South: 64.2% in Alabama, 76.1% in Florida, 62.0% in Georgia, 72.7% in Louisiana, 69.0% in Mississippi, 62.5% in North Carolina, 60.1% in South Carolina, 59.8% in Virginia (Committee on Ways and Means, 2004, Table 7-7). In many states, cash assistance dwindled, dropping for a family of three in Mississippi from $117.00 per month in 1996 to $101.00 in 1998, and in Alabama from $144.00 to $140.00 (Committee on Ways and Means, 2004, p. 7-36).

If the War on Poverty marked a new front to assist the poor for many low-income families in the South, welfare reform represented a retreat, and a protracted retreat at that.

Two decades after welfare reform, 1.5 million American households, including 3 million children, were scrambling to get by on less than $2.00 per day (Edin & Shaefer, 2015). Significantly, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), AFDC's successor, declined dramatically, providing benefits to 68 out of every 100 eligible families in 1996 and to 27 eligible poor families in 2010 (Stoesz, 2016, p. 14). Much of the caseload collapse would be attributed to increasingly punitive eligibility requirements, sanctions that ejected entire families from assistance, and the belief of low-income families that welfare was not available for them, despite their eligibility.

Any summary of poverty in the United States must acknowledge the interplay between social insurance, such as Social Security, and public assistance, such as TANF. For policy analysts, this distinction accounts for an awkwardness imposed by federalism; but for the poor, the distinction has been moot. The Social Security Act denied millions of poor households a public pension, which was available to other workers, forcing them to rely on public assistance, or welfare, which was initially nonexistent or minimal. When welfare uptake became too objectionable, politicians, Democrats and Republicans alike, resorted to a work regime, paradoxically the very norm that government had violated by excluding agricultural and domestic workers from Social Security. Denied a public pension, the minority poor would be effectively denied welfare, as well, ironically through the imposition of a work mandate. Denied TANF, an increasing number of families cobbled together incomes by means that were illegal as regards federal welfare programs, including selling Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Benefits, doubling-up in Section 8 apartment units, and generating unreported income through scavenging for scrap metal, selling blood plasma, engaging in prostitution, and selling drugs, their 21st century living conditions mirroring those of 20th century farm workers, debased lives then and now. As before, their numbers are disproportionately minorities.[7]

The sad tale of excluding agricultural and domestic workers from Social Security, which has been replicated in the denial of welfare benefits to the poor, would continue with the most recent addition to the American welfare state: the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Designed to universalize health care, the 2010 ACA included a mandatory expansion of Medicaid for the poor. In *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sibelius,* however, the Supreme Court ruled in 2012 that the Medicaid expansion would be optional; states could not be required to expand health care to the poor despite billions of dollars in federal funding to underwrite program expansion.[8] By 2015, all of the states that had comprised the Confederacy, save Arkansas, had rejected the expansion of Medicaid, effectively denying access to health care to their disproportionately minority poor (22 states are not expanding Medicaid, 2015). The effects of the denial of access to health care are significant. A 2006 analysis of regions of the United States revealed that African American adults in the delta had higher rates of contagious disease, accidental injuries, cardiovascular disease, HIV, and cancer compared to other regions of the nation. Indeed, their health outcomes were similar to nations in sub-Saharan Africa (Murray et al., 2006, p. 1518).

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[7] While the focus of this essay is on federal benefits, the minority poor were also denied state benefits. Until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Negroes in the South were denied educational opportunity due to segregation. After Brown, Southern legislators endorsed the establishment of a parallel system of private, White schools to evade the Supreme Court edict. In the late 1950s Virginia officials were more assertive, the state legislature passing a law endorsing "massive resistance," which not only defied the Supreme Court, but also closed public schools in the state, denying Blacks an education. Decades later, the international league tables on education rank Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and New Mexico with developing nations. In 2014, the high school noncompletion rate of youth living in the Southern poverty belt—Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Florida, and New Mexico—exceeded that of other states.

[8] In writing the majority opinion, Chief Justice Roberts contended that the traditional contract between the federal government and states underlying federalism had been violated by the federal requirement that states expand Medicaid as a result of their reliance on federal subsidies to the health assistance program, which the states would lose had they not complied with the Medicaid expansion: "The threatened loss of over 10 percent of a State's overall budget, in contrast, is economic dragooning that leaves the States with no real option but to acquiesce in the Medicaid expansion" (*National Federation of Independent Business v. Sibelius*, 567 U.S. June 28, 2012).

The Denouement

In retrospect, the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers would compromise the Social Security Act and mar the New Deal. "Roosevelt's program rested on the assumption that a just society could be secured by imposing a welfare state on a capitalist foundation," observed William Leuchtenburg (1963, p. 165) on the eve of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, a social experiment that would prove problematic at best. "Without critically challenging the system of private profit, the New Deal reformers were employing the power of government not only to discipline business but to bolster unionization, pension the elderly, succor the crippled, give relief to the needy and extend a hand to the forgotten men" (Leuchtenburg, 1963, p. 165). In this case, about one third of workers during the Depression have been, quite literally, forgotten.

The full impact of the failure to acknowledge the labor of agricultural and domestic workers in the South and Southwest contributed to the backwardness of the region. While the exclusion of these low-wage workers can be quantified, the monetization of their loss of benefits does not address what this income might have purchased for them individually or contributed to these regions economically. While workers in other parts of America were enjoying the benefits of running water, flush toilets, electric refrigerators, automobile travel, plummeting disease rates, and increasing longevity, those in the South and Southwest continued to rely on hauling water from the pump, using the privy, an unhealthy diet due to absence of refrigeration, travel by foot or wagon, high rates of disease, and significantly shorter longevity. Life in the rural South and Southwest was Hobbesian compared to the industrialized regions of the nation.

Denied a pension, the minority poor had to resort to minimal public assistance, which, once it became too burdensome for government, would be conditioned on a work requirement, a blatant contradiction escaping the scrutiny of prominent poverty analysts.

For a withholding tax of as little as $5.00 a year, individual workers could have been provided an annual pension of $240, which would have afforded them a modicum of comfort, security, and dignity. In aggregate, the amount would have been comparable to a domestic Marshall Plan, jump-starting the economy of a poverty belt that spanned the South and Southwest. The order of magnitude represented by these benefits—$618.24 billion in 2016 dollars between the inception of Social Security in 1935 and the amendments of the early 1950s—approximates for the South and Southwest what Congress appropriated as a stimulus to the *entire* nation to address the Great Recession, the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act projected to expend $787 billion over a decade (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, n.d.).

Historically, then, the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from Social Security is but another event in an American tableau of second-class citizenship for minorities of color. Sandwiched between Jim Crow and the civil rights movement, and extended through welfare reform of 1996 and health reform of 2010, the exclusion replicated diminished citizenship for African Americans and Hispanics through education, welfare, and health care, which continues today.

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