The Southern Diaspora and the Urban Crisis: The Migratory Origins of the Ford Foundation’s Urban Programming

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Abstract

This report examines the role played by rural-to-urban internal migration within the United States in the postwar policy landscape, through the example of the Ford Foundation’s urban programming in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Southern Diaspora, defined as the mass movement of Black and white southerners to the industrial North, from the 1930s onward, was a central feature of social science and policy analyses about the challenges faced by American cities. After the Second World War, private philanthropy returned to the stage of migration knowledge, in particular through the involvement of the Ford Foundation and its director of Public Affairs, Paul Ylvisaker. This report explores concerns over internal migration and the maladjustment of Black and white southern communities in struggling eastern and midwestern inner cities. They helped define the direction of the Ford Foundation’s postwar urban programming through the specific example of three projects that explicitly intersected with the Southern Diaspora: the Berea Workshop on the Urban Adjustment of Southern Appalachian Migrants, the Great Cities program, and the Gray Areas program. This report argues that an interracial migration paradigm, whose integration within Ford Foundation policies was the result of some level of collaboration with southern experts, was not merely politically expedient, allowing the Foundation to avoid the controversy of race-specific programs. Rather, it reflected the legacy of the well-established migratory lens that had dominated analyses of urban problems for decades, updated to the age of the urban crisis and cultural approaches to the poverty problem.
Over the course of the twentieth century, close to 30 million migrants left the American South—some settling permanently, others temporarily, in the industrial North. In 1920, there were over 1.5 million southerners living in western, northeastern and midwestern states. In 1950, that number exceeded 7 million— in 1970, 10 million. Black and white southerners’ expanding presence in the industrial North reshaped working-class life at several junctures and played a pivotal role in the history of urban, industrial, and racial unrest that shaped the contested terrain of postwar cities. Yet, the Southern Diaspora remains, in the words of historian James Gregory, “one of the missing links in historical understandings of that recent century.” The combined internal movement of southerners is still largely under-examined by a scholarship that frequently separates North and South, but also the Black and white migrant communities within them, leaving underexplored the variety of networks, connections, and convergences that united two regions whose boundaries might have been more fluid and malleable than the frequent fixity of their historical representation implies.

My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) contributed to a wider project that seeks to partly address this historiographical gap. Ranging from 1930 to 1974, this project traces the evolution of sociological interpretations of the Southern Diaspora, and the urban policies that they influenced across the colour line. It was partly, I argue, the challenges of internal mobility towards the urban North that gave rise to the interlocking network of government agencies, private foundations, and research institutes that operated together to define the parameters of social science research in the early decades of the twentieth century. Yet the rootedness of this process in the newfound visibility of southern migrants (and, importantly, of southern migrants, both Black and white) remains to be more systematically examined. In turn, internal migration played a pivotal role in shaping key urban policies throughout the twentieth century, as local governments, social workers, and philanthropic actors scrambled to address the social and economic tensions that followed the influx of internal migrants to northern cities, ill-prepared to receive them. In that sense, charting the evolution of internal migration knowledge, and the views of the social scientists and policymakers who molded it, may help to uncover the centrality of internal migration as a nexus of twentieth-century urban policy and social thought.
My visit to the RAC allowed me to access sources providing essential insight into the role played by the internal movement of Black and white southerners, and their communities in the urban North, in defining the parameters of urban policy throughout the late 1950s and 1960s. The Ford Foundation constituted the focus of this inquiry, with an emphasis on three programs that explicitly intersected with the Southern Diaspora: the Urban Appalachian program (more commonly referred to as the Berea workshop), the Great Cities program, and the Gray Areas program.

Following a flurry of philanthropic activity and knowledge-gathering that followed the early waves of internal movement in the first decades of the twentieth century, the postwar decades saw a resurgence of philanthropic interest in the influx of southerners to the urban and industrial centers of the Midwest and the eastern seaboard.\(^3\) The Second World War was a turning point. Close to 1.6 million Black migrants, and 2.5 million of their white counterparts, streamed into urban centers in search of war work.\(^4\) They found cities that, despite the skyrocketing growth of defence production, were ill-prepared to bear the weight of newcomers, most of whom were southern, rural, and destitute. In northern cities, the influx of war workers put urban infrastructures and social services, as well as labor and race relations, under considerable stress. In the wake of several wartime riots (the most visible of which was the Detroit riot in 1943), municipal governments created new urban institutions dedicated to improving race relations as well as facilitating the integration of southern migrants (such as the Detroit Mayor’s Interracial Committee, Cincinnati’s Mayor’s Friendly Relations Committee, and Chicago’s Committee on New Residents).

As internal migration became a prime point of focus for local policymakers, the postwar period simultaneously signaled a return of philanthropic foundations as key actors of migration knowledge. The Ford Foundation was, at the end of the 1950s, attempting to rejuvenate its urban programming and address the cluster of factors (ranging from physical decay, increasing suburbanization, industrial flight, and tense race relations) that historians would later term the urban crisis.\(^5\) Internal, rural-to-urban migration played a central role in that narrative, making the Ford Foundation a key actor—arguably the most important one—in shaping migration knowledge and the policies that derived from it in the second half of the twentieth century.
This foregrounding of migration is owed to Paul Ylvisaker, the Foundation’s director of Public Affairs Programs from 1955 to 1967. In that capacity, he oversaw all three of the interrelated projects outlined above and remains known, in particular, as the architect of the Gray Areas program. In 1960, migration had become, declared Ylvisaker “one of our liveliest interests again.” Grant dollars expanded in that area, he wrote to Perley Ayers of the Council of the Southern Mountains “are amongst our better spent.”

Despite his declared lack of patience for the abstractions of lofty academic theorising, Ylvisaker’s understanding of the challenges faced by modern cities was anchored in the Chicago School’s urban ecology. He described the city as a “continuous system of attracting the newcomer (once the Scotch, the Irish, the Jews, the Italians, now the Negroes, the Puerto Ricans, the mountain whites, the Mexicans, and the American Indians) and of assimilating this newcomer to all that is up-to-date and sought after in the urban culture.”

Some thirty years after Robert Park and Ernest Burgess put forward the concept of migrant succession, however, the same mechanisms of acculturation and upwards mobility had ceased to function for those newest immigrant groups left to the abandoned inner-cities that the Foundation’s vernacular soon deemed a “gray area.” For these European migrants, the United States had been “a land of promise,” where newcomers were able to trade the exploitation of their labor for middle class status, or even wealth. Taken up by Henry Heald, the Foundation’s president, this understanding of turn-of-the-century migration pushed by the Ford Foundation maintained that:

their experience as aliens did not result in alienation. Indeed, their rapid assimilation is one of the greatest successes of American social history. In contrast, the experience of today’s newcomers to the city is thus far a chapter, not of acceptance and assimilation, but of confinement, isolation, and rejection. The special irony is that far from being alien peoples, most of them are descendants of generations long resident in this land. Yet to a degree few of us appreciate, they are alienated – barren of even the minimum of incentive that regards poverty not as a fate to accept but as a challenge to overcome.

In an age of neighbourhood blight, wide-spread unemployment, and white flight, the American newcomers that Ylvisaker, himself a son of a Norwegian minister,
continuously brought up in his speeches and writings as the public-facing travelling salesman of the Foundation’s urban programs, were plagued with juvenile delinquency, unemployment, and social isolation.\(^9\) Ylvisaker based his analysis on an established and incredibly resilient urban sociology concept – maladjustment. This notion had dominated approaches to the migration of rural southerners to the industrial North in social science, media, and policy circles since the 1930s–and Ylvisaker adapted it to the age of the urban crisis.

Significantly, however, the problems of transplanted rural communities were articulated in terms that emphasised cultural factors - and specifically, the commonalities and inadequacy of southern legacies transplanted to an urban context - at the expense of race. This was novel. As much as the northern liberal establishment had spent the past decades approaching urban issues through the lens of migration, the Chicago School sociologists, Midwestern social workers, and journalists who had defined the stakes of urban adjustment, had always replicated the colour line that still separates the two streams of the Southern Diaspora in much of the historical scholarship. Black and white southerners’ “problematic” integration within urban modernity, their presumed backwards racial and industrial attitudes, and cultural propensity towards delinquency and family disorganisation were a cause of concern for policy planners and social scientists alike. Yet, despite the similarities of the language through which they were evoked, the African American and urban ‘hillbilly” problems remained separate.

By contrast, Gray Areas residents were defined, in geographic terms, simply as newcomers: they were white Appalachian mountaineers and former African American sharecroppers from the Jim Crow South, Puerto Ricans seeking to escape of the island’s economic crisis, and Native Americans streaming into cities following World War II, all of whom now found themselves in the urban jungles of the inner city. This emphasis on migration itself, which Ylvisaker described as an “intellectual breakthrough,” was as strategic as it was operational.\(^{10}\) The obfuscating language of “Gray Areas,” as several historians have pointed out, captured the Ford Foundation’s ambivalence about directly confronting the issues of racial conflict and discrimination that plagued inner cities and their overwhelmingly Black populations. In much the same way, Ylvisaker’s insistence on the diversity of Gray Area residents–migrants all, and indiscriminately–
and his emphasis on the cultural, rather than racial, barriers that prevented their assimilation into urban norms and the upwardly middle class, all provided an acceptable maneuver around what Ylvisaker deemed “the Verbotens of race relations” that implicitly guided Ford’s controversy-averse approach to urban reform.11

Ylvisaker’s frequent references to the Appalachian South and its migrants (which were as frequent, in his public-facing analysis, as direct references to inner-city African Americans, many of them also first or second-generation migrants from the South), served a similarly practical purpose. There were, in 1960, close to 6.5 million southerners living outside of the boundaries of the South (African Americans from the same states, by contrast, numbered just above 3 million).12 While much more transient than their Black migrant counterparts, those “poor whites” in decaying port-of-entry neighbourhoods deemed, “hillbilly ghettos,” attracted a significant amount of attention from liberal observers, swift to blame the wartime deterioration of northern race relations on the Jim Crow transplants crowding their cities’ streets and shopfloors. In the wake of the 1943 Detroit riot, United Auto Workers President R.J. Thomas joined Walter White and Thurgood Marshall of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in calling for an investigation into the Ku Klux Klan and other hate groups that “played upon the prejudices of the large southern white population which has moved into Detroit war jobs.”13 In 1957, the Chicago Tribune published a series of articles about the “hillbilly jungle” of Lakeview, depicting its residents as clannish, prejudiced, and fast with a knife.

Simultaneously, this postwar investment of transplanted Southern whites, as the simultaneous embodiment of new forms of urban poverty and a threat to the northern liberal order, coincided with a rediscovery of the Appalachian region as a crucible of homegrown American poverty. It contradicted widespread notions of postwar affluence; this alternate perspective was exemplified by the runaway success of Michael Harrington’s The Other America.14 The newfound attention towards Appalachia on the national stage gave inner-city poverty a homegrown, “white ethnic” face. Purposefully mobilising the myths of the mountain South, what Ylvisaker called, semi-ironically, “the sturdy oaks of our culture,” made southern migration a race-blind and politically unassailable “entry point” through which the Ford Foundation could approach antipoverty reform.15
However, the prominence of urban Appalachian migrants in Ylvisaker’s analysis was not a matter of mere political expediency. Several of the Foundation’s interrelated urban programs spanning the late 1950s and early 1960s were, on the contrary, both analytically and practically anchored in a growing awareness of the combined effects of Southern migration both Black and white to declining urban centers. The impetus for some of this programming came from Appalachia itself. In 1959, the Ford Foundation extended a grant of $20,000 to the Council of the Southern Mountains to operate a three week-long summer workshop dedicated to urban Appalachian migration at Berea College, Kentucky.\textsuperscript{16} Created in 1912, the Council of the Southern Mountains (CSM) ran several social programs in southern Appalachian communities and sought to direct philanthropic and government resources to the region. Illustrating the circulation of knowledge, personnel, and financial resources that had characterised internal migration knowledge since the 1930s, the idea for the Council of the Southern Mountains’ Urban Adjustment Workshop originated not in Berea but in Cincinnati, a city whose proximity to northern Kentucky ensured a steady stream of migrants from the mountains.

Inspired by a similar effort dedicated to Puerto Rican communities in New York City, members of the Mayor’s Friendly Relations Committee, Cincinnati’s interracial committee, convened with CSM officials to discuss the possibility of gathering southern experts of Appalachian culture, along with the teachers, social workers, housing and law enforcement officers of the midwestern cities (Chicago, Dayton, Cincinnati, Detroit, Akron, Columbus, and Cleveland) that were recipients of Appalachian migration.\textsuperscript{17} Launched in 1959 with the support of the Ford Foundation, the Berea workshop ran the course of ten years. Its first iterations had a theoretical component (in the form of talks given by local academics, social workers, or law enforcement officers) and a bus tour of the mountains, during which northern participants were taken to rural hospitals, factories, schools, and churches.\textsuperscript{18} For CSM organisers, the goal of the workshop was to help urban workers better understand transplanted southern white communities by presenting to them the “facts” of mountain life – its economy, religion, social organisation, family structure, and folklore. To southern social scientists, like sociologists James Brown and Roscoe Giffin who contributed to the workshop, Appalachian culture was not dysfunctional, as many urban outsiders held, but
simultaneously suffering from the isolation and economic devastation of their region of origin and not adapted to city life. Severed from the web of history and social relationships of their native context, Appalachian social practices and values proved inadequate in helping migrants and their children cope with the demands of an urban existence that the dire economic circumstances of their home states had forced them to confront, and to which they were thoroughly unprepared.\textsuperscript{19}

The Berea workshop was modest in terms of the financial means expanded by the Ford Foundation, yet, the Council of the Southern Mountains’ understanding of southern white culture, and underlying concerns over rural-to-urban migration, held a significant level of influence over the Foundation’s forthcoming experimental programs in urban areas. In that sense, insight into the Ford Foundation’s relationship with the Council of the Southern Mountains, and the latter’s participation in the first phase of the Gray Areas program, does complicate our understanding of the Foundation’s urban experiments and their roots within southern migration.

In 1960, the Ford Foundation launched the Great Cities School Improvement program, the first phase of what would become the Gray Areas program. Tested in Boston, Oakland, New Haven, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC with an initial appropriation of $1,250,000, the project later expanded to several other cities that, like Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis, hosted large communities of southern in-migrants, both southern whites and African Americans.\textsuperscript{20} Through grants to local social and municipal agencies, the Great Cities program sought to improve inner-city schools, especially in order to prevent juvenile delinquency, prevent drop-outs, and ensure young people’s entry into the workforce. Programs, ranging from elementary to high school, relied on a mix of curriculum reform, after-school support, and remedial classes. In a nod to the tenet of community action that would become central to the Gray Area program in its later phases, Great Cities schools sought to involve both community agencies and local parents in programs that, in several cities, stopped extremely short of proper citizen participation.\textsuperscript{21}

Many Great Cities programs across the country also included, however, a cultural component that aimed at encouraging the assimilation of students into urban living patterns and the norms of northern, modern citizenship. Keeping their doors open after
hours, schools additionally offered parents and local residents adult education classes, vocational training, and sessions meant to address and remedy the same cultural deficiencies that had, for decades, dominated northern depictions of southern migrants, both Black and white. The focus was on addressing their supposed lack of understanding of urban norms of health, cleanliness, and medical care, or their refusal to avail themselves of the resources (such as social services) available to them—all unadjusted traits that, for the Ford Foundation and their local partners, found their presumed roots in transplanted southern behaviors and legacies that parents were passing onto their children. From their perspective, a recognition that these behaviors were perpetuating the cycle of poverty was starting to emerge in social scientific discourse.\footnote{22}

Alternately referring to its target areas as “depressed urban areas,” the “culturally deprived,” “culturally different,” or “culturally handicapped” child, the Great Cities program once again deployed a race-neutral language that obfuscated the fact that, as much of its less public-facing documentation makes clear, the vast majority of the neighbourhoods served, in fact, were majority African American areas. Yet, the culturally disadvantaged child was primarily understood as a migrant child. This claim was made explicit by several of the grant administrators, who referred, once again to the legacies of transplanted rural southern culture and cited the influx of children from economically depressed sections of the South as a critical factor of school overcrowding, leading to an increasing number of children being held back due to the poor educational facilities of their states of origin.\footnote{23} Furthering the program’s anchoring into a migratory framework, provisions were made in Chicago and Detroit to send teachers involved in Great Cities schools to the Berea workshop, where they would benefit from the CSM’s not-quite-indigenous insight into mountain culture and its exports.\footnote{24}

From the Great Cities program and its emphasis on schools, the Gray Areas program expanded to other “demonstration cities” (starting with Boston, Philadelphia, Oakland, New Haven and Washington, DC), evolving from a limited focus on schools to a multifaceted program that sought to address the roots of inner-city deprivation. Ranging from housing to social services and employment, the grants emphasised the participation of poor residents and community-based organisations in the formulation of that integrated response through community action. Officially launched in 1961-
1962, the Gray Areas program was several years in the making. While the historical literature has mostly focused on the program’s emphasis on community action and its influence on Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty program, its analytical roots, and many of the on-the-ground issues it tried to address, were to be found in the challenges posed by internal migration. The Ford Foundation’s focus on internal migration (and especially its concern over Appalachian migration) was, undoubtedly, a practical strategy that allowed officials to avoid the controversy attached to race-conscious programs, and, additionally, to displace necessary discussions of racial and structural economic barriers onto much more amenable cultural notions of adjustment and assimilation. In that sense, the Southern Diaspora was part of the apparatus that allowed liberal social policies, throughout the postwar years, to address poverty as a cultural issue, at the expense of institutional and structural frameworks of inequality. Yet, to see the Southern Diaspora as a mere political expedient would be ignoring both its prominent role in early Gray Areas grants revealed by the Ford Foundation’s documentation, and the continuities of policy and social science that had positioned rural-to-urban migration and the internal migrant both Black and white as a genuine problem for cities to solve for the past three decades. Part of this effort, significantly, was coming from Appalachia itself, and neither the role of the Council of Southern Mountains in molding dominant understandings of Appalachian culture, nor the thread that connected Berea to northern cities, and ran underneath Gray Area programming, should be discounted.

In the 1960s, southern migration was already past its numerical peak. On the eve of 1970, 6.5 million white southerners, and 3.2 million Black southerners, resided outside the South. While a significant number of migrants (now increasingly proportionally white) continued to stream out of the South throughout the last decades of the twentieth century, the 1970s were a turning point, as declining numbers coincided with an increasing return migration from northern cities struck by deindustrialisation and urban disorders to an economically revitalized South. Decreased mobility and changes to the political economy of the North and South closed the door on an era when the visible consequences of the Southern Diaspora dominated several aspects of urban life, and played a central role in shaping understandings of the challenges faced by modern cities. Internal migration, however, had by that point stopped being the dominant paradigm in efforts to solve those very same urban challenges. Even as some
sections of the South attracted national attention as a constantly rediscovered crucible of homegrown American poverty, the migratory framework of urban adjustment steadily became eclipsed throughout the 1960s by a cultural turn. It put forward the formation of a culture of poverty among a racialized urban underclass, whose dominant traits were arguably themselves rooted in the conjunction of an emerging urban crisis with decades of accumulated sociological understandings of southern culture both Black and white. The centrality of the Southern Diaspora in late 1950s-early 1960s Ford Foundation urban programming was, in that sense, both a culmination, in the domain of policy, of the decades-long primacy of migration knowledge, and simultaneously, the twilight of that migration framework. Policymakers and social scientists turned from the problems of urban adjustment and hillbilly ghettos towards those of inner city neighbourhoods—even as the populations that fell under those umbrellas were, more often than not, one and the same. Yet, from the 1930s to the mid-1960s, rural-to-urban internal migration to the industrial North was a key interrogation in both the local government and private philanthropic policy landscape. Its importance should not be obscured by its eclipse from public discourse. Despite a relative lack of attention from the historical scholarship, the Southern Diaspora, as the conjunction of Black and white internal migration, played a significant but underexplored part in shaping lasting understandings of urban issues - especially urban poverty - as well as the racial, economic and cultural categories that underlined them.

2 Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, 6. Gregory’s phrase of “Southern Diaspora” will be preferred over that of “Great Migration,” which has been used exclusively to refer to the internal movement of African Americans, rather than to northward migration as an integrated phenomenon.


16 Terms of grant to Berea College, Kentucky, April 15, A959, Grant File P.A. 59-212, Reel 0171, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
18 Clarence Senior to Paul Ylvisaker, internal memo, August 3, 1959, Grant File P.A. 59-212, Reel 0171, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
24 Lester W. Nelson to Benjamin C. Willis, June 17, 1960, L609-200, Reel 0213, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
26 Most historians consider the early 1970s to mark the end of the Great Migration. See, for instance, Trotter, Joe William, The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). A corresponding decline in white southern migration can be seen towards the end of that decade.