
Constant Struggle: E. Franklin Frazier and Black Social Work in the 1920s

White men and women who are otherwise kind and law abiding will indulge in the most revolting forms of cruelty toward black people. Thus the whole system of ideas respecting the Negro is dissociated from the normal personality.... These dissociated systems of ideas have a strong emotional component and are known as complexes. The Negro complex, the designation which we shall give the system of ideas which most Southerners have respecting the Negro, has the same emotional tone that characterizes insane complexes.¹

E. Franklin Frazier, the eminent black sociologist and the first black president of the American Sociological Association, wrote the above statement in an article, "The Pathology of Race Prejudice," published in *Forum* in 1927. At that time, Frazier lived and worked in Atlanta where he was director of the Atlanta School of Social Work. Within a week, the *Atlantic Constitution* carried a lead editorial about the article.² Not surprisingly, the southern press in the 1920s did not appreciate "so privileged a student and so settled a sociologist" referring to white racists as insane people with a "color crazy streak." The editorial concluded that the young director of the first black school of social work was "evidently more insane by reason of his anti-white complex than any southerner obsessed by his anti-negro repulsions."

As a result of this publicity, Frazier and his family received threats on their lives and were forced to leave Atlanta. "Things got so hot down there," reminisced Marie Frazier, "that he finally decided we had to leave. He put a .45 in his belt and said, 'Honey, I'm getting on this train. Now I don't want you to go with me because if I get in trouble, what's the importance of you being there?' And I said, 'When you leave, I'm leaving with you.' And I did."³

As Drake noted, the 1927 article has become a legend in black history, and Frazier emerged as a "combative hero,

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During the 1920s, E. Franklin Frazier, the eminent black sociologist, was director of the Atlanta School of Social Work. With other black social workers, Frazier made important contributions to social work and to the struggle against racism. His legacy is missing in most histories of social welfare and is relevant to the crisis confronting social work in the 1980s.

fighting a rear-guard action against the Ku Klux Klan."⁴ Whatever the truth about the incident, clearly it was not safe for a black intellectual to express such ideas in the South in the 1920s (nor did it become so in the 1930s, 1940s, or 1950s). Thus ended Frazier's work in Atlanta and five years of professional association with social work. That fall he entered the doctoral program in sociology at the University of Chicago.

Frazier contributed significantly to social work as an administrator, researcher, and activist during his tenure at the Atlanta School of Social Work. He is best known for the distinguished contributions he made to the sociology of the family, race relations, and stratification in the black community after he received his doctorate and moved in 1934 to his lifelong position at Howard University. Although the 1920s were Frazier's formative years and the foundation of his more mature work, in this decade he also made some original contributions to social work and set an example of militant activism against racism. In this article, these contributions will be assessed in the context of racism and the black community, the professionalization of social work, and the South in the 1920s.

This article not only profiles E. Franklin Frazier, but also attempts to resurrect an important legacy of social

work that contemporary historians have largely ignored. Aside from a useful anthology edited by Ross, leading social work texts generally are silent on the contributions of black professionals in the 1920s.⁵ There are few references in standard histories of social welfare to the efforts of black leaders, intellectuals, and social workers to secure minimal social services for black communities and training for black social workers.⁶ Chambers recounts in *Seedtime of Reform* the efforts of reform-minded settlement workers such as Florence Kelley, Jane Addams, and Bruno Lasker to promote "good neighborhood" and awareness of racial problems in the profession, but leaves untold the story of black self-help organizations and social workers who fought racism consistently.⁷ Similarly, Ehrenreich's and Katz's significant studies of the history of social work and social policies include perceptive chapters about the dynamics of racism in the United States during the 1920s, but nothing about the activities or contributions of black social workers.⁸

History and Context

E. Franklin Frazier's ideology and activism was a product of the enormous racial turmoil during and after World War I. By 1919, nearly 400,000 black Americans had been drafted into the segregated armed forces and had tasted a new life, both bitter and hopeful. Northern black neighborhoods, swollen into ghettos by the migration of some 400,000 black southerners in response to the wartime demand for labor, were hardly the "promised land." Unemployment soared after the armistice, and the improved living conditions in the North as compared with the South were not enough to compensate for the bitter experience of being segregated in ghettos with substandard housing, exorbitant rents, and discrimination in employment and other aspects of everyday life.

Bloody race riots erupted in 28 cities, including East St. Louis in 1917 and Chicago in 1919, and thousands marched in protest of government policies that sought to "make the world safe for democracy" while blacks suffered violent attacks and segregation in the United States. Seventy-eight black Americans, including 10 exsoldiers, were lynched in 1919. By 1923, membership of the Ku Klux Klan had increased to more than three million, and racism, backed up by the xenophobic Immigration Act of 1921, was rampant.

The new generation of black people did not, however, submit to racial attacks. Throughout the country, black communities organized in self-defense, black political and cultural leaders spoke out to denounce racism, and a new militant student movement challenged the paternalistic governance of black colleges.

Frazier's Background

Born in Baltimore in 1894, Frazier grew up during a time of economic and social upheaval and witnessed the birth of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1909), the appointment of W.E.B. Du Bois as editor of *Crisis* (1911), the death of Booker Washington (1915), and the introduction to New York of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (1917). Frazier was raised in a working class family and rose to prominence by virtue of family encouragement, personal effort, and fortuitous circumstances.

Frazier was educated in Baltimore's segregated school system, from which he won a coveted scholarship to Howard University. After getting his bachelor's degree in 1916, he taught for three years in southern black schools, and, in 1919, with the help of a scholarship, entered Clark University in Massachusetts, where he received a master's degree in sociology.⁹

Scientific Racism

In the South in the 1920s, black professionals and scholars faced institutionalized constraints and humiliation. This context puts in perspective the modest gains Frazier and his colleagues made, which involved monumental effort.

It was highly unusual for a working-class black man such as Frazier to complete a graduate degree successfully in the 1920s and 1930s. Before World War I, only 14 black people in the United States had received PhD degrees from recognized universities. Even black academics who had an advanced degree from a prestigious university could not find teaching jobs outside of black colleges. Du Bois noted in 1934 that "not one of the twelve colored PhDs of last year, trained by highest American and European standards, is going to get a job in any white university."¹⁰

After World War I, while Frazier slowly moved through the educational system, leading intellectuals enthusiastically constructed elaborate theories of racial differentiation to legitimize social inequality and to justify new policies of racial discrimination. The "scientific racism" of the 1920s was not simply the work of a few right-wing fanatics on the fringes of academic life. Gossett noted that

we might misinterpret the strength of the racism of the period, if we imagine that its most formidable proponents were emotional bigots like the Ku Kluxers. It is essential to understand that quite a large number of people eminent in the sciences and social sciences were then genuinely convinced that races vary greatly in innate intelligence and temperament...[I]t was mainly the academic writers on racial differences who made racism respectable.¹¹

When Frazier went to Clark University in 1919, the study of racial differences was just becoming vogue. Frazier's mentor was Professor Frank Hankins, later president of the American Sociological Association, whose book, *The Racial Basis of Civilization*, was a critique of the "extravagant claims of the Nordacists" and the "equally Perverse and doctrinaire contentions of the race egalitarians." Hankins "doubted whether there could be found any negroes who, if brought up under the most favorable circumstances, could develop the intellectual powers necessary to carry on the higher cultural activities of the country."¹² No doubt Hankins felt that Frazier was a rare example of a "gifted strain." It was under the conditions of segregated schooling, academic stereo-

typing, and scientific racism that Frazier completed his master's degree and moved on to social work.

Black Social Work

The employment picture for black people in 1920, the year Frazier completed his master's degree, was bleak. Black veterans leaving the army were unable to find work; the few jobs available were menial and low paying. Black Americans who had earned college degrees became laborers.

In social work, however, there was a demand for educated black workers. Opportunities often flowed from the National Urban League (NUL), which from its inception in 1911 considered itself a social work organization. Focused on the northern cities, NUL's work grew apace with the migration from the South. NUL lobbied for the creation of social service programs and for the training of professional black social workers to staff the programs.¹³

Since 1911, NUL has offered fellowship to young black men and women for study at one of the schools of social work. Frazier applied for and was granted an NUL fellowship, and spent 1920 and 1921 studying at the New York School of Social Work and completing an investigation of black longshoremen. After an interlude as the first black Fellow to Denmark of the American Scandinavian Foundation, Frazier was hired in 1922 as professor of sociology at Morehouse College and Director of the Atlanta School of Social Work.

In 1922, the Atlanta School of Social Work had 14 black students. It was founded two years earlier in response to growing demand in southern cities for black social workers and the efforts of NUL and southern activists. According to Jesse Thomas, the field secretary of the Atlanta Urban League, there was not in 1920 "a colored person who had received training at an accredited school of social work south of Washington, D.C., or east of St. Louis."¹⁴

Frazier's Contributions

During his five-year tenure as director of the Atlanta School of Social Work, Frazier made contributions to social

work as an administrator and theorist, as an activist in the struggle against racism, and as an academician.

Administrator and Theorist

As a social work administrator, Frazier worked diligently to accredit the Atlanta school and “to make it a first class school of professional social work.”¹⁵ By 1927, the school had established a reputation as the preeminent voice for black social work. Frazier traveled north and south, attending conferences, advising communities on social welfare programs, speaking, writing articles, and bringing his tremendous energies to bear on publicizing the school and the need for trained black social workers.

Arthur Davis, Frazier’s colleague at Howard, wrote of this period:

Frazier did yeoman and pioneer work in building up the institution and making it standard. The matter of standards had not been important prior to his directorship. It was thought that a Negro social worker needed the “right attitude” much more than he needed academic preparation. The school was, therefore, inclined to take almost anybody who applied. But the young director insisted on standards, and he travelled throughout the south, selling the idea of an adequately trained social worker.¹⁶

At a time when social work was moving away from activism and striving to certify its competence in psychology, Frazier was interested in expanding cooperative enterprises and black self-help organizations. Frazier was angry that black people had been robbed systematically of opportunities to participate in community, social, political, economic, and intellectual life, and he urged that social workers create those opportunities by building cooperative businesses, self-help groups, youth clubs, and schools.¹⁷

Frazier supported in particular the work of Atlanta’s Neighborhood Union. The Neighborhood Union was founded in 1908 and remained in the 1920s the fountainhead of a remarkable tradition of black self-help in the city. The Neighborhood Union, which counted as its members nearly the entire black population of Atlanta, concerned itself with recreation,

sickness, mental illness, poverty, unemployment, truancy, and “moral uplift.” The Neighborhood Union was, further, an example of indigenous social welfare organizations painstakingly built in both northern and southern cities, many of which met their demise in the twenties with the development of governmental programs and community chests.¹⁸

Struggle against Racism

Frazier also made important contributions to the black movement of the 1920s and was outspoken in his denunciation of racism. Frazier was a product of his generation’s militancy, which he brought with him to the Atlanta School of Social Work. He wrote that, as a student,

I began to take an intense interest in the Negro problem. I was militant in my opposition to the existing race relations and urged young Negroes to assume a militant attitude toward discrimination and oppression.¹⁹

Frazier opposed U.S. participation in World War I, which he considered hypocritical in light of racial discrimination in the United States. In 1920, he was arrested in New York for picketing the racist movie, *Birth of a Nation*. At Clark, Frazier surveyed militant, post-World War I black organizations in his master’s thesis, “New Currents of Thought Among the Colored People of America,” and concluded that

the new spirit which has produced the New Negro bids fair to transform the whole race. America faces a new race that has awakened, and in the realization of its strength has girt its loins to run the race with other men.²⁰

Frazier did not share in the disillusionment with reform and social action that characterized much of social work during the 1920s. Professionalism in social work, for Frazier, did not include remaining silent on the major issues of the day. Frazier, in fact, wrote in 1924 that social work held “the greatest promise for improving race relations in the south.”²¹ His sanguine assessment of social work’s “tremendous possibilities” was based on the profession’s scientific approach and the “re-baptism in the liberal spirit” that

social workers received at annual conventions. Frazier was disenchanted with the possibility of any activism coming out of black churches, which, he wrote, “have done scarcely anything” to ameliorate race relations and “are more interested in getting Negroes into heaven than in getting them out of the hell they live in on earth.”²² He hoped social work would fill the breach.

Frazier’s personal militancy, his outlook, and his keen desire to investigate the lives of black people throughout Georgia quickly brought him into conflict not only with white racists, but also with black intellectuals and leaders ready to accommodate the status quo. Frazier participated in the struggle against racism in the pages of *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, the *Messenger*, *Modern Quarterly*, the *Nation*, *The World Tomorrow*, and *Forum* in polemical articles replete with statistics, historical and economic analysis, case studies, and his own knowledge of everyday life of black people in Georgia. For example, in “The Negro and Non-Resistance,” Frazier responded to the wave of lynching in Georgia by advocating self-defense and deriding the “deceit and fawning” of “so-called Negro leaders” who in pretending to “emulate the meekness of the Nazarene” forgot to follow “his example of unrestrained denunciation of injustice and hypocrisy.” In this context, Frazier added, hatred is a powerful moral force “if it saves the Negro by hating the oppression and the oppressors.”²³

The wealth of information in Frazier’s articles contrasts sharply with the paucity of information about black Americans found in social work journals and conferences of the time. Despite the fact that black social workers were engaged in substantial research on black workers, families, and communities, and despite the inspiring stories of self-help programs built by black activists, official social work publications carried few references to black people during the twenties. Of the few articles that did address the topic, several perpetuated racist values, particularly two carried in *Survey*, the unofficial organ of social work. One, a report on the Ku Klux Klan in Texas from Edward Devine, former editor of *Survey* and founder of the New York School of Social Work, concluded:

It is easy to laugh at the absurdities of the Klan, its childish follies, its illicit nomenclature, its fallacious conception of law and order. But it is not easily laughed out of existence—close at hand it is serious. It has a certain dignity of purpose.²⁴

Supplementing Devine's thoughts on the dignity of purpose of the Klan (which elicited two angry letters from readers), *Survey* carried an article on life in northern ghettos. Although undoubtedly intended to be sympathetic to black people "precipitated into the slough of poverty in industrial cities," the article portrayed black men and women as foolish and childlike, and optimistically concluded:

In spite of the color lines that are drawn in so many places, [black people's] eyes are ever toward the morning and they know that sometime they will come to the land that has neither night nor race distinctions and where love alone remains.²⁵

In Atlanta, Frazier faced many personal experiences with racism and was proud of his reputation as a fighter and a "race man." In a remarkable set of unpublished memoranda embodying stories of experiences with whites, particularly in the South, which he submitted to Myrdal's pioneering study, *An American Dilemma*, Frazier described one local social work conference to which he was invited. As was his custom, he inquired whether black participants were to be "Jim Crowed." Assured that they would not be, Frazier arrived early, but soon noticed that black participants arriving later were directed to seats around him. Frazier got up immediately to leave, and as he was going out the door a social worker addressed him:

"Professor Frazier, ...you'll be back, won't you?" I replied, "I have told you white people not to invite me to any meeting where you are going to place the Negroes to themselves as if they were roaches or fleas and unfit for human association." He said nothing. Later, I learned that he had said I had lacerated his heart by my remarks. I told him that he had lacerated every Negro by trying to segregate them. Later on a meeting of social workers was held in the same auditorium and according to their promise there was no segregation. I feel fairly certain that my attitude was influential in bringing about the change in these meetings.²⁶

Frazier's refusal to attend segregated conferences and his militant articles led to growing conflict between him and the board of directors of the Atlanta School of Social Work. "My position on the Race Problem...and my attitude toward the south...was not what was expected of one in my position," Frazier wrote later.²⁷ In 1927, the board, alarmed with Frazier's militancy, asked him to resign his position as director.

Contributions to Knowledge

In the five years that Frazier was in Atlanta, he published 29 articles while he also taught courses, administered the School of Social Work, conducted research, and attended numerous con-

Frazier devoted his intellectual and political attention to exposing the socioeconomic roots of racism and to building collective forms of self-help and resistance in the poorest strata of the black community.

ferences.²⁸ A number of themes, both intellectual and topical, emerge in Frazier's publications during the 1920s. First, he tirelessly chronicled black community life and social customs. Drawing on social work's case method, Frazier went to the docks, union halls, and saloons in New York to study black longshoremen; using what he learned in his studies of cooperatives in Denmark, he explored self-help enterprises in the South; he walked around the rural South and talked with people about their daily lives and mechanisms of survival; he collected statistics and did historical and economic analyses; he visited the homes and

businesses of the new class of entrepreneurs in North Carolina. His work is filled with ethnographic richness and complexity based on first-hand experience and appreciation of the subjective factor in social life.

Frazier also was interested in what he called the "psychology of people in subjection," in particular how black people internalize, accommodate, and resist the trauma of racism.⁹ Writing about longshoremen, for example, he noted that "it is the success of the deliberate and calculated plan of the south to inculcate in Negroes diffidence and self-abasement."³⁰ He therefore welcomed efforts by black people to express their anger and defiance. "I believe it would be better for the Negro's soul to be seared with hate than dwarfed by self-abasement," he wrote in a polemic against nonviolence.³¹ Frazier probed the psychological dynamics of racists, as well as of their victims. In his famous article titled "The Pathology of Race Prejudice," Frazier argued a strong case for the irrationality of racism.³² Social work, though keenly interested in the new field of psychology, did not, in its professional meetings and publications, discuss its application vis à vis racism.

Frazier was extraordinarily class conscious and applied himself to understanding the stratification of the black community.³³ His work on the new middle class is filled with insights about its precarious economic foundations and with trenchant criticisms of ministers who preached appeasement, educators who taught accommodation, and business owners who advocated capitalism. At the same time, he understood the political dilemmas facing black leaders and appreciated the complex and contradictory forces in their lives.

Intellectually and politically Frazier lived, in the words of one of his professors at the University of Chicago, "closest to the edge of danger."³⁴ In the 1920s, when social work was turning its back on racism and moving toward individualized casework and a middle class clientele in search of professionalization, Frazier devoted his attention to exposing the socioeconomic roots of racism and to building collective forms of self-help and resistance in the poorest strata of the black community.

Applicable Today

The legacy of E. Franklin Frazier and of other black social workers has largely been forgotten, ignored, or discredited by the official guardians of social work history. This legacy should be remembered so that the contributions of black Americans to social work can be properly credited. But this is not only a matter of historical accuracy. The issues Frazier and his colleagues raised in the 1920s are relevant to the crisis confronting social work in the 1980s. Now, as then, society faces a resurgence of racism, economic polarization, and political hostility to social programs. Now, as then, mainstream social work is repudiating its commitment to activism and community-based programs, accommodating austerity, and reviving the medical model of intervention. Issues such as the pathology of race prejudice, the psychology of people in subjugation, the need for neighborhood self-help and economic cooperatives, and the social responsibilities of professionals unfortunately are not historical curiosities.

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