

The Golden Rule

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In 1964, Bryant Parker and Johnny Hart revised the Bible's empathetic Golden Rule to reflect the root of economic disparity: "Remember the Golden Rule: whoever has the gold, makes the rules!" While presented in jest via a cartoon, its message clearly reflected economic disparities, often associated with race, in the nineteen sixties. Politicians often strive to maintain their own financial standing and that of their electoral base, motivating them to pass legislation that might appear racially neutral, but creates significant negative consequences for minority populations. The drive for profit resulted in dramatic economic racial disparities.

The Reconstruction Era ended slavery and established African Americans as citizens of the United States; however, political freedoms did not result in economic parity. Both convict labor and debt peonage ran rampant through the southern states, with often deadly consequences. Convict laborers who worked in mines had as high as a forty percent mortality rate.¹ The system's over-incarceration of African Americans prevented individuals from working independently to support their families, and, upon their release, their criminal record had the potential to continue to prevent them from finding reliable work. Debt peonage virtually enslaved individuals who sharecropped at rates as high as ninety percent, guaranteeing that the labor would continue indefinitely.² Justices of the peace would arrest men to provide labor to farmers as convict labor. It also indebted laborers to the business owners who would pay fines and demand work from them after arrest. Finally, the Supreme Court's 1886 protection of corporate personhood allowed private businesses to deny employment to African Americans, despite the Fourteenth Amendment making it unconstitutional for a state to "deprive any person

¹ Samuel D. Pollard, dir. *Slavery by Another Name* (Arlington, VA: PBS, 2012), <https://mnsu.kanopy.com/welcome/video/slavery-another-name>

² *Ibid.*

of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.”³ The judiciary prevented African Americans from pursuing legitimate economic opportunities; it was “brutal in a social sense but fiendishly rational in an economic sense.”⁴

The New Deal Era continued to exacerbate economic disparities between races. While FDR was more effective than his distant cousin had been at ending southern peonage, many of his New Deal programs that meant to bring Americans out of the Great Depression neglected the African American community. De facto segregation and prejudice in the North forced black men into the most brutal factory jobs.⁵ Welfare programs assumed a two-parent household in which the father worked and the mother stayed home, a reality that existed more often for white families than for African Americans. When domestic workers were ineligible for unemployment insurance, it exacerbated the problem created by welfare’s requirements, keeping 87% of black women from insurance benefits. This inequality created the image that African Americans were “dependent on-and stigmatized by-the stingy, means-tested programs known as ‘welfare’ today.”⁶ For African American men under the New Deal, both the G.I. Bill of Rights and the Federal Housing Authority’s lending policies prevented them from acquiring home loans in the dramatic numbers that white men did, leading to de facto segregation between cities and suburbs. Underlying all of this was the assumption that African Americans had equal access; without overtly discriminatory laws, there was the appearance of opportunity for everyone, who were perceived to bear “the onus of their own failure or success.”⁷

The Civil Rights Movement brought a voice to those negatively impacted by policies.

Technological developments and single-party holds on the South - Democrats until 1964, then

³ U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 1.

⁴ Pollard. *Slavery by Another Name*.

⁵ Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1240.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1241

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1247.

Republicans after that realigning election - increased wealth for the upper class but eliminated jobs for the lower classes. As Hall notes, “Thus even as the South prospered, racial disparity widened.”⁸ Nixon took advantage of the South’s influx of Northerners and expanding middle class to secure the region as a Republican stronghold, restricting representation for African Americans, who overwhelmingly voted for Democratic candidates. Hall notes the Civil Rights Movement’s economic focus led by Martin Luther King, a “democratic socialist who advocated unionization, planned the Poor People's Campaign, and was assassinated in 1968 while supporting a sanitation strike.”⁹ Though that narrative is often minimized, it reflects the financial issues that are “the gordian knot that ties race to class and civil rights to workers' rights.”¹⁰ The New Deal and post-war policies that created segregated suburbs and cities continued as communities solidified across multiple generations. “Encouraged by tax incentives, highway building programs, and a desire to outflank the new unions, factories and businesses moved to the suburbs as well, eroding the cities' tax base, damaging infrastructure, and eviscerating municipal services;” these policy changes limited resources available to African Americans.¹¹

The history of civil rights is intricately connected with economic opportunity. Wealthy lawmakers were supported by wealthy white patrons and businesses, and their success and successors depended on their ability to make rules that kept the gold in their hands. “The motivation of that was profit... and so, at the end of the day, that part of this country’s legacy is still with us;” the legacy of the economic policies promoted in the Reconstruction, New Deal, and Civil Rights era is one of economic racial disparity.¹²

⁸ Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement”, p.1244.

⁹ Ibid., p. 1234.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 1239

¹¹ Ibid., p. 1242.

¹² Pollard. Slavery by Another Name.