



The Bottom Rung: African American Family Life on Southern Farms

By Stewart E. Tolnay

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"The Bottom Rung" presents an in-depth investigation of a population that is becoming extinct in American society: the black farmer. Tracing patterns of marriage and childbearing among both whites and blacks during the first decades of this century, Stewart Tolnay pursues questions about how black southern farm families were formed and dissolved, how they educated their children or put them to work in the fields, and how they migrated in search of opportunity. Further, he considers the possible legacy of these experiences for family life in contemporary urban environments. Making revealing and innovative use of public records from the early part of the twentieth century, Tolnay challenges the widely held idea that southern migrants to northern cities carried with them a dysfunctional family culture. He demonstrates the powerful impact of economic conditions on family life and views patterns of marriage and childbearing as responsive to prevailing social, economic, and political conditions. In a provocative extension of this perspective, Tolnay argues that current high levels of single-parenthood among urban African American families likewise reflect rational responses to the socio-economic environment and government policies. By placing post-World War II demographic developments in a wider historical perspective, "The Bottom Rung" sheds new light on recent discussions of the difficulties faced by the modern black urban family. The text is enhanced by Dorothea Lange's and Russell Lee's poignant photographs.

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"This exciting and innovative analysis should be required reading for anyone seeking to understand the origins of African-American family structure...Although the book has much to offer specialists, it is suitable for a broad audience, including undergraduates in introductory courses... A major contribution to the literature." - Steven Ruggles, American Journal of Sociology "By viewing developments over the course of the century, first in the rural South and then in urban settings, Tolnay explains how economic changes, government policies, and racial discrimination affected black families. Tolnay's arguments are persuasive, and his study deserves careful attention." - William F. Holmes, The Journal of American History "A solid piece of scholarship. Tolnay's analysis illustrates the vital demographic patterns that defined southern black life in the first half of the 20th century, without forgetting the people behind the numbers." - Labour History "Both a useful introduction to the demography of African-Americans and an important work that definitively established important patterns of African-American demographic behavior in the first half of the 20th century... A solid piece of scholarship." -- Labor History ADVANCE PRAISE "Tolnay's argument contradicts the received wisdom of both the popular media and much scholarship. This is a timely and critical study, important for scholars and for those interested in public policy." -Orville Vernon Burton, author of In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina

About the Author

Stewart Tolnay is S. Frank Miyamoto Professor of Sociology at the University of Washington.

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