

# The Black Worker, Economic Justice and the Speeches of Sadie T.M. Alexander

Nina Banks  
*Bucknell University, USA*

**Abstract** This paper examines Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander's challenge to racial oppression within the US. In 1921, Alexander became the first African American woman to earn a PhD in economics. The author links Alexander's arguments for black political rights to the provision of economic justice for working class Americans.

**Keywords:** economic justice, black workers, full employment, redistributive policies

## INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1930s, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, an economist and lawyer, developed arguments to overcome black oppression by calling for policies that would lead to economic justice. Alexander challenged unfair laws and practices directed against African Americans. This paper introduces Sadie Alexander's recommendations to improve the status of black Americans through the formation of interracial labor alliances, public sector job creation, and policies to redistribute national income. These policies, she believed, would benefit white workers as well as black workers, and Alexander argued that, by doing so, white Americans would be less likely to infringe upon the political and economic rights of racial minorities.

This paper suggests that Sadie Alexander's analysis of racial conflict and the need for full employment and income redistribution continues to be relevant to the US political economy. Economic insecurity over the availability of jobs, livable wages, and adequate benefits are persistent

concerns for US workers, particularly with the decline in unionization and the increase in globalization. Deindustrialization has been especially burdensome for African Americans because of their concentration in urban communities experiencing massive job loss.

A broader aim of the paper is to recover Sadie Alexander's economic arguments and to incorporate them into economic analysis. As the only woman among a handful of African American economists in the early-to-mid twentieth century, Sadie Alexander offered a unique perspective on black working conditions. Her strategies for improving the welfare of black Americans, however, have been missing from economic analysis because she was not employed as an economist.<sup>1</sup>

Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, the first African American woman to obtain a doctorate degree in economics, was never given the opportunity to work as a professional economist because of discrimination. After earning a law degree in 1927, Alexander spent the duration of her life challenging structural impediments that prevented African Americans from exercising their rights as citizens. From the 1920s through the 1960s, she made speeches across the country that advanced the interests and concerns of black workers. Her speeches—principally economic in content—were addressed to black audiences, racially mixed audiences, religious groups, clubwomen, sororities, members of political parties, and civil rights organizations. Alexander served in elected positions at the national level in the National Urban League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Delta Sigma Theta sorority, National Bar Association, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Sadie Alexander was pro-labor and argued for the necessity of black and white workers organizing around their common interests as workers, yet her primary struggle was against the oppression of black Americans. Her work was part of a strand in political discourse that linked arguments for political freedoms and equality to the provision of jobs and other necessities of life. By promoting economic justice, Alexander's ideas were in line with a black radical tradition.

Sadie Tanner Mossell was born in 1898 in Philadelphia Pennsylvania. Mossell's maternal grandfather was A.M.E. Bishop Tanner. Mossell's father, Aaron Mossell, Jr, was the first black to graduate from the law school at the University of Pennsylvania Mossell lived in Washington, DC for much of her

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<sup>1</sup> Sadie Alexander worked as a practicing attorney rather than as an economist. Kenneth Mack (2005) maintains that after World War II, Sadie Alexander and other leaders in the African American "civil rights bar" attempted to secure the economic citizenship guarantees of the New Deal for black Americans by focusing their attention on the formation of cross-racial, class-based alliances with whites rather than through laying the foundation to court remedies to racial discrimination.

childhood and attended the M Street School. She received a BSc degree in education in 1918 and a Master's degree in economics from the University of Pennsylvania in 1919. In 1921, for the first time in US history, three African American women, including Mossell, were awarded doctorate degrees. Mossell said that no company or university would hire her, despite having recommendations from her professors, so she relocated to Durham after she was hired by North Carolina Mutual Life, the largest black insurance company in the US (Alexander 1964). Mossell worked there for two years until she married Raymond Pace Alexander after he graduated from Harvard law school.

Sadie Alexander achieved another milestone in 1927, when she graduated from Penn's law school and was admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar. Holding both Juris Doctorate and Doctor of Philosophy degrees, she was one of the most highly educated individuals in the country. Raymond Alexander hired Sadie Alexander to work for his law firm. According to Mack (2001–2002), the Alexander law firm was responsible for most of the desegregation litigation in Pennsylvania. In 1928, she became the first black woman appointed Assistant City Solicitor for Philadelphia. President Truman appointed Alexander to The Committee on Human Rights in 1946. The committee monitored civil rights in the US and developed a report, "To Secure These Rights," which was one of the most important civil rights documents issued prior to the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Mack 2001–2002: 1406).

### **BLACK POLITICAL THOUGHT**

According to Wintz (1996), two main political ideologies dominated African American thought following Reconstruction. The first tradition, associated with Frederick Douglass, T. Thomas Fortune, and later with W.E.B. DuBois, challenged racial separation and disenfranchisement of African American citizens and stressed the importance of agitation for racial justice. The second tradition, associated with Alexander Crummell, rector of St Luke's Episcopal Church in Washington, DC and later with Booker T. Washington, emphasized the need for African American self-help, community building and economic development, and race pride until justice was extended to the black community. The lines of demarcation between the traditions were blurred as black intellectuals and leaders often advocated aspects of both traditions.

Black radicals were a part of the African American intellectual tradition that advocated agitation for overcoming black oppression. According to

Fletcher (1999), black radicalism in the US has included faith-based activists, socialists, communists, radical democrats, feminists, and revolutionary nationalists. He argues that, for black radicals, the source of black liberation is the black masses acting either alone or in alliance with other groups to challenge dominant racial and class interests. A key aspect of black radicalism is that it calls for struggles against capitalist exploitation of workers. A. Philip Randolph, in his early years as a socialist, embraced the idea that class conflict was at the core of racial conflict and that a united working class could solve racial problems (Wintz 1996). Fletcher says that at the height of twentieth century labor activism (1934–1950), the struggle for black liberation was perceived to be tied to but not defined by the goals of organized labor (1999: 6).

Alexander's opposition to racial oppression was within a black radical tradition. Her ideas evolved to reflect the changing political economy from the 1920s through the 1960s. Her political and economic thinking embraced the dominant racial ideas of the times and become progressively more radical by the end of World War II and continued in this manner through the Civil Rights era. This is in contrast to Abram Harris, who was then a radical as well as the leading African American economist. In the post-World War II period, Harris turned his attention away from racial matters and did not return to them until the early 1960s (Darity 1989). Alexander did not embrace socialism but her ideas were consistent with radical ideas for economic justice. Class and the need for interracial working class alliances was a central part of her analysis of black oppression. In accordance with black radicalism, Alexander interpreted black liberation on the basis of policies beneficial to black workers. Unlike Abram Harris, Alexander examined *both* black men and women's working conditions and made policy recommendations to benefit black women workers specifically. According to Darity (1997), Harris and the other Howard University radicals, Ralph Bunche and E. Franklin Franzier, viewed capitalist exploitation of labor as the fundamental problem facing blacks and they believed that this could be overcome through multiracial labor organizing. As such, they rejected agitation for civil rights until blacks had achieved economic power (1997: 234).

Alexander, however, agitated against white dominance in the political and social realms as well as in the economic arena. In her speeches, she encouraged grassroots political mobilization and community organizing to redress unfair legislation and practices and to hold public officials accountable to the black community. This paper analyzes her efforts to combat black poverty, unemployment, and economic marginalization through redistributive and full employment policies. For Alexander, the

struggle for black Americans to *fully* exercise their democratic rights was contingent upon their ability to secure these fundamental economic rights.

Racial and economic justice are intricately linked. Historically, racial antagonisms in the US have been correlated with the state of the economy. When jobs have been scarce, competition over them has typically been accompanied by heightened racial antagonism (Roediger 1991; Rubin 1995). According to Dreier (1998), racial justice therefore rests on the provision of economic justice for all working class Americans. Economic justice entails redistributive policies directed to combat low wages, poverty, and unemployment. Scaperlanda defines economic justice as “fundamentally questions about the ethics of income distribution” and distinguishes between mainstream and heterodox understandings of economic justice (1999: 419). In mainstream approaches, market forces provide labor market participants with a just distribution of national income. Heterodox economists, however, believe that labor market outcomes can and should be improved since market forces are not perfect. Redistributing goods and services, raising wages, and generating jobs for all who want to work would improve living standards for poor and low-income workers and diminish capital’s ability to threaten workers with job loss. Racial tensions that accompany competition over limited jobs would decrease.

### **ALEXANDER’S POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC THOUGHT**

Alexander’s speeches and writings reveal a sustained commitment to challenging racial oppression in the US. Many of her speeches from the 1930s and 1940s, alluded to in records of her correspondence and speaking engagements, are not in her archival records stored at the University of Pennsylvania. Some of the early speeches from the 1920s were handwritten on paper that has deteriorated. Nonetheless, it is possible to piece together and develop a sense of her ideas for improving the welfare of African Americans, particularly black workers, from the great many documents that have been preserved in the Archives. Alexander was an integrationist who sought to incorporate blacks into the mainstream of American life through legislative reforms and through collective action by blacks. Over time, her political and economic thinking about the means to incorporate black workers into the industrial economy came to embrace ideas associated with economic justice—full employment, the provision of basic needs, and redistribution of national income in favor of poor people. Ultimately, she called for a fundamental restructuring of our economic system through the guarantee of jobs to all who wanted to work. Alexander believed that

government, industry, labor, schools, and community members would have to coordinate their efforts to help ensure that all Americans would have an equal chance to develop to their full potential (1963: 6).

### **Black Workers in the Expanding US Economy**

In the 1920s, young Alexander embraced ideas that encouraged blacks to obtain business training in order to become a more central part of the expanding world economy. During this period, black workers were gaining access to industrial jobs in the north because of the increased demand for black labor there during World War I. Black migration from the rural south to northward destinations accelerated as a consequence of this demand and 1.5 million African Americans relocated to the north from 1916–1930. The majority of black industrial workers, however, were concentrated in unskilled and cleaning jobs. The jobs had limited mobility and often exposed workers to substantial health hazards (Gottlieb 1987; Jones 1985).

The first speech on file in the Archives is listed as “Fragment” and in it Alexander discussed the success of the US in producing goods at a “market price which makes them saleable in the world. The man who produces goods for the world market contributes to the happiness of all mankind and to the wealth of his own nation. You do not purchase goods unless they satisfy your tastes” (Alexander c1920s: 1–2). She added that the US was able to gain dominance in the world market of goods and become powerful as a result of its productive capabilities. Alexander worried that black workers would not play a part in the success of US industry since they were marginal workers—loading goods onto ships for export rather than producing them. She urged blacks to obtain training in business, saying:

More physicians, lawyers, dentists, school teachers can not place us in a position of importance in a nation of producers. Go into the Schools of Business, young men and women and then do not come out and moan because some white firm will not hire you as a salesman. Do you aspire to sell the goods another man has manufactured or to manufacture goods for him to buy and sell for you . . . Go into business young men . . . Go into business young women . . . Make yourselves a part of the economic system which has placed America as a formidable economic competitor of England—the greatest exporting nation the world has known. Write your names, the name of your race in American Industry, in the export columns and . . . [no one] can deny your contributions to America for you and your race will be a part of the very life which American greatness is measured. (Alexander c1920s: 5–6).

This speech embraces a Washingtonian ideology that encourages the development of business skills. Washington had put forth the idea that black progress was tied to skills demanded by the market (Boxill 1984: 21). Alexander's speech discouraged professional and graduate level training and, instead, advocated that blacks learn how to produce something useful to the nation. Mack (2005) maintains that black lawyers of the 1920s embraced this "voluntarist" approach to achieving equal status with whites by emphasizing intraracial work that they believed African Americans needed to do in order to more fully participate in civil society. Sadie Alexander also expressed race pride and self-help in the speech by calling on blacks to counter the perception that they had not contributed to the nation. Unlike Washington, however, Alexander believed in the efficacy of agitation to bring about social change. As later speeches illustrate, Alexander advocated agitation through the political process as well as by organized labor.

Over the decade of the 1930s, Alexander focused particular interest on black women workers. In "Negro Women in Our Economic Life," Alexander discussed historical changes in women's status due to the Industrial Revolution. The article appeared in the Urban League's *Opportunity* magazine in 1930 and is Alexander's only published economics article. The article anticipates many of the arguments about women's work made by feminist economists in the late twentieth century. According to Alexander, when the family was the unit of production, women's contribution to household production was recognized as valuable. However, as industrialization increased and household production of goods and services were increasingly produced by the industrial sector, women's home responsibilities came to be regarded as lacking value because they were not exchanged for a wage. Alexander observed this transition without being critical of it. She recommended that women become a part of the expanding industrial economy so that they would once again be regarded as productive laborers (1930: 97). The article then analyzes black women's participation in paid labor, their occupational distribution, and their wages. Alexander maintained that black women's employment in industrial jobs benefited their families because it increased women's earnings and shortened their work hours compared to domestic service, thus enabling women to take night courses for additional training.

The *Opportunity* publication is one of the only articles or speeches in which class analysis is an explicit part of Alexander's arguments for racial equality. She wrote:

The association between the various racial groups employed in a factory will prove an important factor in solving the laborer's problems. The real seat of racial friction

is between the working groups, whose resistance to change in the economic status of a competing group invariably expresses itself in what we commonly define as race, or class prejudice. Could the great mass of white workers learn from industrial experience with Negro workers that they have a common purpose in life, the protection of their bargaining power, and that the sooner the untouched wealth of Negro labor is harnessed into this common purpose, the better can they bargain with capital; then and only then would industrial racial friction subside. (1930: 99)

Her reasoning—that a unified working class would be in a better position to bargain with capital—did not address the dilemma that white workers might benefit more from putting their racial interests above their class interests. By aligning themselves with white owners of capital to exclude or limit black workers, white workers would still benefit from a wage premium that they might lose otherwise (Schulman 1996; Boxill 1984). Nonetheless, the article suggested that interracial cooperation between black and white workers against capital was necessary for racial animosity to decrease.

### **Great Depression, New Deal, and the Black Community**

The Great Depression (1929–1933) was especially devastating to African Americans because they disproportionately lost jobs as tenant farmers in the south and as industrial workers in the north. In rural areas, where the majority of African Americans was still concentrated, the economic depression began in the early 1920s with the boll weevil infestation and with international competition in cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane production. Farmers responded to the decreased demand for their crops by producing more, and the oversupply had the effect of eroding crop prices. Cotton prices fell from 18 cents a pound in 1929 to just six cents a pound in 1933, pushing farm laborers to the brink of starvation (Hine *et al.* 2000). Those blacks who had migrated to northern and midwestern cities lost jobs in which they had been marginally employed.

In a 1930s speech, most likely given to an Urban League gathering, entitled, “The Economic Status of Negro Women, An Index to the Negro’s Economic Status,” Alexander discussed the status of black women workers based on the 1930 census and maintained that their position indicated the economic status of the black community. According to Alexander’s research, 40 percent of Negro women over the age of ten were employed, a figure about two times greater than foreign and native-born white women. She attributed black women’s higher employment rate to economic necessity,

stating that this is a “sad commentary on the economic status of our race,” because black women’s employment in low-wage work was tied to black men’s high rates of unemployment and irregular earnings (Alexander c1930s: 1). Alexander, however, was concerned not that black women were employed but that they were employed at jobs outside of the industrial sector. Over 60 percent of employed black women worked as domestic servants and 27 percent worked in agriculture, two sectors of the economy most adversely affected by the Great Depression. (c1930s: 2). Black workers, therefore, experienced higher rates of unemployment during the Depression and, consequently, were more likely than whites to be represented among relief rolls. In 1933, some 25 to 40 percent of African Americans were on relief—a figure that was three to four times greater than the percentage of white Americans on relief (Franklin and Moss 2000).

Alexander recommended that blacks, through the Urban League, press for legislation that would provide adequate relief for black workers. In the speech, she urged the audience to press for change now rather than focus on otherworldly concerns. Alexander reminded the middle-class gathering that their economic status and ability to earn livelihoods in professions that served a black clientele were dependent upon the black masses (c1930s: 6). Black business owners were more adversely affected by the collapse of the economy than their white counterparts because black businesses relied on the patronage of the deeply impoverished black community. Alexander stated:

Not only must we place on the statute books legislation that is of special benefit to the Negro worker but we must with equal force and zeal see that the Negro worker receives his or her full share of all relief legislation. Never since Reconstruction has there existed such a favorable chance for the federal government to influence the condition of the Negro masses. By scrupulously fair administration of all types of direct and indirect federal aid—in farm relief, public works program and subsidized relief, the principle of equitable distribution can for the first time be enforced for Negro labor in America. But unless the Negro’s claims are definitely, persistently and forcibly brought before the governmental bodies there is real danger that not only will he be overlooked or neglected but that the reorganization of industry will have him in a worse position than prior to the depression. (c1930s: 5)

Alexander ended the speech by stating that black professionals had a duty to work for the benefit of black workers since middle class savings were based on the labor of the masses. However dependent middle class blacks were on black workers, Alexander’s use of inclusive language “[so] that we may not be subjected to greater poverty after the depression” indicates that she did

not posit much of a separation between different classes of blacks in their economic and political interests.<sup>2</sup>

For Alexander, the duty to serve the black masses also extended to religious organizations. She believed that the black church had an obligation and a special role to play in the struggle to improve life for poor blacks. Her views on the role of the church in promoting black welfare were stated in a speech on “Negro Achievement” in 1936. According to Alexander:

...any program proposed for racial achievement one must first consider the influence of the Negro church ... The success of any plan to improve the status of our group must be dependent upon the cooperation of the Negro clergyman and the Negro church, because they come nearer than any other group to controlling the thought of the masses. We must develop some plan by which this group of leaders will realize the social implications of Christian salvation ... Jesus ... knew that if the lives of the poor were to be made happier, if their souls were to be made purer, there must be an improvement in their general social conditions. His sympathy for the poor did not stop with charity but flowed out into a concept of social justice. (Alexander 1936: 7–8)

Alexander was very active in church organizations and her religious convictions were also a source of her radicalism. Wilmore (1984) maintains that, although the black church has been reactionary in its acceptance of white American mythology, it has also been profoundly radical in its doctrine for black liberation.

As the Great Depression wore on, Alexander became less optimistic about federal efforts to provide relief, reform, and recovery policies that were beneficial to blacks. As a loyal Republican during the period when most African Americans still belonged to the party of Lincoln, Alexander was understandably critical of Democratic policies, including the New Deal, which she characterized as a “raw deal for the average citizen” (Alexander 1935a: 1). In a speech that she gave for the Republican Party in Lackawanna County elections in 1935, she addressed the issue of blacks voting for Democrats but urged the audience to vote Republican and return liberal judges to office. Soon thereafter, however, in a speech before the Eastern Federation of Negro Republicans, Alexander talked about her dissatisfaction with the Republican Party which, unlike the Democratic Party, had ignored its black voters and not appointed them to positions. And yet, Alexander continued to express concern over blacks switching to the Democratic Party

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<sup>2</sup> For an interesting discussion of different perceptions about the poor by black and white middle class professionals, see Linda Gordon (1991).

because of her belief that it was controlled by conservative southern Democrats<sup>3</sup> (Alexander 1935b: 5). Her criticism of New Deal relief policies was based on the disproportionately negative impact that unemployment had on the black community. Alexander stated:

Let us examine our present economic status. The number of Negroes on relief has steadily increased. Today over three million Negroes of all ages are receiving relief, which means that even a larger number are unemployed. 18.4% [*sic*] of all cases on relief are Negroes, although Negroes are only 9.4% of the population. In spite of and largely because of this volume of Negro unemployed over 1/3 (36%) of the child labor in America is Negro. Approximately 1/4 of all women 15 years of age and over are workers but Negro women form 1/4 of all married women working away from home. The ratio is about three times greater than that of all women. The cause for this appalling economic condition can largely be traced to the effect of relief legislation of the Roosevelt Administration. (1935b: 6)

In a talk given at the Elks' Educational and Economic Conference on "The Economic and Occupational Status of Negroes" in 1935/1936, Alexander elaborated on the impact that the Depression and New Deal were having on black workers. She stated:

Then came the National Recovery Act, which might well bear the nomenclature Negro Reduction Act. We all know only too well that particularly in the South, employers refused to pay Negroes the same wages as paid white labor for identical work as a consequence of which Negroes lost their jobs. Then the necessity of raising wages for jobs held by Negroes had the effect of attracting the large body of white unemployed workers to traditional Negro jobs. Next, as a measure of economy, many jobs were combined by small employers and given added dignity—too great for Negro labor to fill. Finally, and perhaps the most widespread effect was the forced closing of the small business which had been able to operate only by paying unusually small wages to Negro labor. (Alexander 1935/1936: 3)

Alexander was particularly concerned with the loss of traditional black jobs for the black community. She believed that traditional black jobs such as railroad workers, wait staff, and elevator operators were disappearing as black workers were displaced by whites. Because these and other black jobs, such as domestic service, were low-status, blacks generally did not have to compete against white workers prior to the Great Depression. During the

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander's concern that the Democratic Party was controlled by conservative white southerners was based on the exclusive control that this group had over politics in the south where black voters were effectively disenfranchised by white Democrats.

Depression, however, whites experiencing unemployment often were able to push blacks out of these jobs by intimidating employers into firing blacks (Hine *et al.* 2000). Alexander recommended that this was a problem in need of study in order to determine the ways in which these jobs could be maintained as well as prepare blacks for new fields (Alexander 1936: 7).

To counter the harmful effects that the Depression and New Deal policies were having on black workers, Alexander encouraged the black community to support other blacks. In addition to the National Recovery Act, Alexander cited the detrimental impact of the Agricultural Adjust Act (AAA) and Social Security Act on black workers through provisions that excluded them from coverage to policies that generated increased unemployment for black workers.<sup>4</sup> The inequitable way in which the Agricultural Adjustment Act was administered by southern whites contributed to the displacement of black tenant farmers from southern farms. The AAA was one of the first New Deal policies enacted by Franklin Roosevelt after he took office. The AAA provided subsidies to farmers—including tenant farmers and sharecroppers—to cut back on the production of cash crops so that prices would stabilize. White landlords, however, often kept checks intended for black farmers and ultimately forced blacks off farms when provisions were made in the AAA that tenants should be paid directly. Although the AAA was intended to help both black and white farmers, black exclusion from the political sphere in the South ensured that the act would be unfairly administered (Hine *et al.* 2000). Alexander stated to the gathering of black Republicans that “the ultimate solution to our problem lies in the obtaining of favorable laws to protect and advance the Negro masses . . . nor can we hope for favorable legislation until Negro representatives are a part of the lawmaking bodies of the United States . . . vote for Negro candidates. When we thus demonstrate our strength we guarantee the future welfare of the Negro race” (1935b: 8–9). Unlike her 1930 address, “The Economic Status of Negro Women, An Index to the Negro’s Economic Status,” this speech indicates that, five years later, Alexander had moved away from looking to government to pass favorable legislation *for* blacks and, instead, believed that electing black legislators—blacks acting on their own behalf—would be the only guarantee that this would occur.<sup>5</sup>

4 Southern white Democrats in Congress were able to exclude agricultural and domestic laborers from the benefits of the Social Security Act and the National Labor Relations Act. This had the effect of excluding the substantial number of blacks who worked in these sectors.

5 The mass migration of southern African Americans to urban areas of the north and midwest enabled them to concentrate their voting power and enhance their political clout with northern white politicians. In 1928, Chicago blacks elected Oscar De Priest to the House of Representatives, making him the first African American elected to Congress from the North. De Priest was succeeded in 1934 by Arthur Mitchell, a black

In a speech that she gave in 1936, "Address on Negro Achievement," Alexander advocated that blacks channel their consumption for the benefit of black communities. She cited the example of a consumers' cooperative league in Indiana that was very successful in generating sales and had a sizeable membership. Eventually the members of the cooperative were able to set up a credit union which lent money to members. Alexander stated that "in any program for future development we must include the teaching of ways and means to harness Negro purchasing power so that it will improve the economic status of the Negro people themselves and not make rich any immigrant who establishes a corner store in a Negro neighborhood" (Alexander 1936: 6). This was consistent with other cooperative efforts, such as the Housewives' Leagues, undertaken by blacks during the Great Depression.<sup>6</sup>

### **Economic Security, Democracy, and Racial Unrest**

Events occurring during World War II led to a pronounced shift in Alexander's arguments for racial equality. Her rhetoric became more focused on issues of economic justice by the time she gave a speech, "Coming Events Cast Their Shadows," in Detroit in 1939. The speech is a very eloquent statement of the relationship between economic insecurity and the rise of racial antagonisms and hostility, whether in Nazi Germany or in the US. Observing the treatment of Jews in Germany during periods of economic downturn, Alexander worried that the ongoing denial of democratic protections for blacks in the US against racial violence and discrimination could lead to a similar fate for minorities in the US (Alexander 1939a).

In a speech given later that year, Alexander cited recent incidents in the US which, for her, indicated a heightened period of racial animosity and intolerance. These events included the refusal of the Daughters of the American Revolution to allow Marian Anderson to perform at Constitution Hall, the unwillingness of avowed white liberals to issue pronouncements

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Democrat who had previously been registered as a Republican. Mitchell was the first African American Democrat elected to Congress, signaling the willingness of black voters to vote Democrat as well as to switch their party affiliation to Democrat.

6 The Housewives' League began in Detroit in support of black businesses. It organized black women of various classes across the country into boycotting businesses in black communities that did not sell black products or hire black workers. It also encouraged black patronage of black businesses as a way to keep money circulating within black communities. Membership is estimated to have peaked at 10,000 and the boycotts were able to get approximately 75,000 new black workers hired during the Depression. Refer to Jacqueline Jones (1985) for an analysis of the Housewives' Leagues.

condemning racism, the campaigning by a major political party on the basis of having all white native-born candidates, and the implementation of educational restrictions for blacks by schools that once admitted them (Alexander 1939b). Alexander believed the threat to US minorities to be imminent, and urged her audiences to take prompt action against racism.

Alexander called for economic reforms that would make it unlikely that white Americans would resort to fascism as a way of dealing with hunger, homelessness and other manifestations of economic insecurity. She stated:

It is therefore obvious that the maintenance of democratic institutions in America depends first upon the development of an economic system which, as stated by the National Policy Committee, will provide an adequate measure of economic security and justice: which will give the public some effective control over their economic as well as their political liberty; and which will find methods of controlling economic activity so as to

- (a) insure liberty of occupation and consumption, and
- (b) effectively stimulate the production of wealth

(Alexander 1939a: 8)

To do this, Alexander advocated government regulations to smooth out fluctuations in the business cycle, modification of tariffs, regulation of public utilities, and regulation of securities and their markets. She reasoned that curbing economic downturns and insecurity would provide the foundation for democratic governance and safeguard minority rights. Alexander's files also contained the following handwritten note that more clearly makes the link between economic security, democracy, and racial unrest:

The right of all individuals to earn a decent living must be achieved if we here at home and throughout the world are to have the kind of life we call a democracy. We have seen in Europe how the desire of one group to exploit and take the jobs of another has led to the development of elaborate theories attempting to justify intolerance. (Alexander c late 30s early 40s)

As this quote illustrates, Alexander's ideas for economic reform were pro-labor since they promoted livable wages for workers. However, she also advocated changes that would benefit businesses. Alexander called for relief for capital along with relief efforts aimed at workers. Her policy recommendations included loans for businesses as well as workers, and uniform state taxes on corporations so that they would be less inclined to relocate from higher cost to lower cost states. The right of all individuals to earn a decent living applied to capital as well as to labor. Alexander stated

that “we must realize that private investors are entitled to as fair a return on their investments as we expect for our labor; that confiscation of private capital means the taking of the small and the big man’s savings and ultimately the freedom of each—as has occurred in Russia” (1939a: 10). Unlike A. Philip Randolph, Alexander did not advocate socialism, but her economic ideas soon became more progressive.

### FULL EMPLOYMENT AND RACIAL ANIMOSITY

Toward the end of World War II, Alexander began to express concern over the implications of the 40 percent cutback in employment estimated by the War Production Board for when the war ended. During the war, the number of blacks in non-farm employment increased from 2,900,000 to 3,800,000 (Hine *et al.* 2000). But once the war ended, black workers were at a disadvantage relative to white workers because of the likelihood for racial discrimination in firings and because they had less seniority than most white workers. Because of this, Alexander believed that black workers would be disproportionately represented among those workers losing jobs. Her recommendations now called for interracial labor organizing as well as for full employment. In a speech given in 1945 at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College in honor of Mary McLeod Bethune entitled, “The Role of Negro Woman in the Economic Life of the Postwar South,” Alexander cited the urging of close friend W.E.B. DuBois and Phillip Murray, president of the CIO, for unions to organize all workers regardless of race. Black union membership had increased dramatically from 200,000 in 1940 to 1.25 million by 1945 after several major labor unions, such as the United Auto Workers, began to organize across racial lines—over the protests of white workers (Jones 1985). In the speech, Alexander then framed her analysis of full employment as a human right:<sup>7</sup>

The right to work is not a black nor a white problem but a human problem . . . . Every man should be concerned that every other man is employed, for only in full employment is the individual laborer assured a job . . . . I need not state to you that full employment for all willing and able to work is also the solution of all over national difficulties. All our national and world problems stem from unemployment. (Alexander 1945: 7)

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7 Sadie Alexander’s files (STMA Box 71, FF 74) contain speeches and other documents from the National Urban League that called attention to the impact of job loss for black workers after the end of World War II. Speeches from the League’s annual conference in 1944 discussed the place of black workers in the post-war period and the need for full employment.

Alexander reminded the audience about the increased competition for jobs among dislocated workers after the First World War and pointed out that insecurity over jobs led to race riots across America. In 1919, more than 25 race riots swept across the US as whites used violence to intimidate blacks and blacks fought back in self-defense. Characterizing her demand for full employment as a right, Alexander linked the freedoms enumerated in the Atlantic Charter—freedom from want and freedom from fear—to citizens’ rights to jobs:

Freedom from want and freedom from fear can not be attained at home, when hordes of unemployed men and women are pounding the city streets, and bargaining on street corners against each other for a chance to do a day’s work. I hold it the obligation of every American to remove those iniquities which have crept into our national life and caused men to fear want and to fear each other. Just as Congress and the courts have recognized the need to protect child labor, the ... [right of] workers to organize for the purposes of collective bargaining and to picket to enforce their contracts with management, as well as the unfair economic treatment of women workers, so too by act of the courts or by congressional act must the right to work in the Postwar World be guaranteed every able bodied man and woman in America, regardless of his race or religious beliefs. Discrimination in employment because of race, color or religion is an abuse of a right as fundamental as denial [of] freedom of religion or freedom of speech. (Alexander 1945: 9)

It is reasonable to assume that Alexander conceptualized full employment as the previous quotes state—jobs for *all* willing and able bodied people who wanted them.<sup>8</sup> This departs from a neoclassical understanding of full employment which allows for a low level of unemployed labor in order to keep inflation from rising.<sup>9</sup> Alexander used the logic of full employment as a strategy to protect black workers since they were marginally employed in the industrial sector. She told her audience, “We Negroes must, therefore, be concerned about any plan for full employment for only by attaining this goal can we be assured of employment” (1945: 12). In the absence of full employment policies, black workers would continue to be subjected to racial

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8 William S. Vickrey, 1996 Nobel laureate in economics, also maintained that the US economy should be committed to a full employment policy that guaranteed jobs to all workers and that this policy was feasible. See Warner *et al.* (2000) for an engrossing analysis of this topic.

9 The measurement of unemployment in the US underestimates the full extent of workers’ inability to obtain jobs. It does not include various categories such as involuntary part-time workers, contingency laborers as well as discouraged workers. Because the measurement covers the civilian, non-institutionalized population, it does not account for the substantial numbers of blacks and Latinos who join the military out of job search frustration or who are incarcerated and would likely be unemployed otherwise.

discrimination in gaining access to industrial jobs and in keeping jobs during economic downturns.

To the question of how could the economy generate the 60 million jobs necessary to achieve post-war full employment, Alexander outlined a program for job creation that would deal with pressing social needs. Her plan relied on the use of industrial plants and labor to combat illiteracy, hunger, lack of clothing, and substandard housing. She stated that “these are needs which demand the production of goods” (1945: 14). Full employment could be achieved by using the nation’s geared up industrial plants and labor to produce goods that provided for basic needs.

Alexander recommended redistributing national income as a way to finance the additional jobs necessary to have a fully employed labor force. The United States’ inequitable distribution was a causal factor in the Great Depression, according to Alexander. She reasoned that:

Our economy went into a downward spiral, not because of deficiencies in ability to produce or desire to consume, but because our distribution of income was such that the masses had no income to purchase goods and the investors refused to place their income and capital in industry because there was no one with money to buy the products. America had the techniques and the materials and the labor supply but lacked a mass purchasing power because of inequitable distribution of the [“benefits from productive efficiency that”] lowered cost of production. (1945: 14–15)

Alexander recommended a taxation policy that would tax businesses so that their excess profits could be used to finance a “public works program to clear slums, provide electricity for every farm and reduce illiteracy” (1945: 15). National income should also be redistributed to increase and broaden social security, unemployment insurance, worker’s compensation, and a minimum wage tied to the cost of living. Her willingness to increase taxes for businesses so that profits could be redistributed to the poor represents a departure from her arguments made during the start of the war that were protective of industry as well as labor.

Alexander then returned to the subject of the ways in which full employment would benefit black workers. In addition to enabling black workers to gain access to more jobs, it would provide opportunities for occupational mobility and seniority and reduce animosity from white workers no longer competing over limited jobs. Alexander wrote:

Full employment is the only solution to the economic subjugation of the Negro, and of the great masses of white labor. If full employment by determination of the people and the government could be obtained for the destructive purposes of war,

why can we not unite to achieve it for the constructive purposes of maintaining the peace. (1945: 17)

She ended the speech by issuing a call to black women to organize for social change. Alexander regarded black women as primary agents of social change within the African American community (Banks 2005). Alexander called upon black women to combine their efforts with other organizations in working for full employment so that black and white workers would no longer be pitted against each other in a destructive process that resulted in poverty and unemployment for both groups of workers (1945: 17).<sup>10</sup>

Alexander's rhetoric for full employment changed after she was appointed to Truman's Committee on Human Rights in 1946. The 15 member committee was charged with studying the provision of civil rights in the US and making recommendations to the President for protecting those rights. Alexander's focus shifted from an evaluation of the post-war economy to, instead, enumerating the rights of citizenship that all Americans should enjoy. The committee's report, "To Secure These Rights," used the language of equal opportunity. Under the heading of equal opportunity, the report stated that all Americans—regardless of race—should have the right to work, to rent/buy a house, and the right to an education. It stated that the right to work was a prerequisite for the right to live (Alexander 1948: 6). Thereafter, for more than a decade, Alexander's speeches were aimed at explaining and promoting the Committee's report. She did this by addressing various groups, such as the Americans for Democratic Action, and discussing the rights advocated within the report. Ten years after the report's publication, Alexander spoke on the issue of progress made in civil rights over the period.

### **Reshaping the US Political Economy**

During the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans increasingly used direct action tactics to challenge ongoing racial exclusion, violence, and oppression. These tactics included consumer boycotts, sit-ins, mass demonstrations and arrests, and freedom rides which were each designed to confront and overturn racist laws and practices. In a speech given in 1963 to the Annual Conference of Commission on Human Rights about the Civil Rights

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<sup>10</sup> Her handwritten, cryptic notes at the bottom of the page have scattered references to socialism and communism. The intention of the notes is difficult to discern, but it appears that these references are placed in a statement of outcomes of unemployment that are negative-national unrest, depressions, fascism, and racism.

movement, Alexander returned to the ideas around economic justice that she articulated nearly 20 years earlier. She wrote favorably about the “people’s revolution,” but warned that the leadership for equal rights might “pass into the hands of the more extreme groups” unless members of the Human Rights Commission did not increase the tempo of change (Alexander 1963: 2). Yet, within the context of this speech, her meaning of “extreme” appears to refer only to those groups that advocated violent struggle rather than groups with radical views. Alexander made this point by saying “this revolution we are in—must take place within the framework of our democratic structure in as orderly a way as possible, without violence and within the law” (1963: 2). On the subject of economic justice, she stated:

What is required is a comprehensive plan and a total process in which government, industry, labor, and the public schools and the representatives of the organized community join together to provide those who have not participated and shared fully in our society, the assurance in concrete ways that they truly have an equal chance. We must provide the hope and the certainty of productive employment to everyone, and especially to Negro young people. The basic purpose of this comprehensive design, this total process, is the development of the deprived, the neglected—the discriminated against—the minority—to its full potential. This is necessary not only to meet the ends of social justice and morality, to fulfill the guarantees of our constitution and laws but because in this era of automation, when tens of thousands of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs are being eliminated, it becomes an economic imperative which is basic to our very existence as a free society. . . . To do this we are going to have to do a lot more than change the self-image of Negroes. We’re going to have to restructure our society. (1963: 6)

In this quote, Alexander moves beyond the language of equal chance and opportunity for work to once again advocating that jobs be guaranteed to all Americans. Toward this end, Alexander believed that the US had a moral and constitutional obligation to extend this fundamental right of citizenship—the right to full employment—to black and other Americans. Social and economic justice would require the involvement of all social institutions and this would lead to a fundamental, radical reshaping of the US political economy.<sup>11</sup>

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11 Alexander’s recommendation for policies that provided “assurance” of equal chances and the “certainty of productive employment to everyone, and especially to Negro young people” was consistent with the more radical black demand for “equality of results” that emerged upon passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It became apparent to black leaders that the extension of political rights to black citizens would not be sufficient to overcome the cumulative effects of their economic deprivation. Special efforts would be needed to compensate blacks for past economic injustices. (Steinberg 1997).

## CONCLUSION

The provision of economic justice was central to Sadie T.M. Alexander's struggle to obtain black political rights. Alexander argued that poverty, low wages, and competition among racial groups over jobs heightened racial hostility and intolerance against racial minorities. As such, she advocated policies to redistribute national income and social goods to low-income groups. Most importantly, Alexander believed that the *guarantee* of jobs to all who wanted to work in the US was both a citizenship and a human right. Full employment would result in the hiring and promotion of more black workers as well as strengthen workers' bargaining position relative to capital. Alexander reasoned that if white workers felt more economically secure, it would lessen their desire to deny or restrict the political rights and freedoms of racial minorities. This was essential for providing a foundation for democratic governance.

Sadie Alexander formulated a plan for full employment through public works projects that provided for pressing social needs: clearing slums, building infrastructure, and reducing hunger and illiteracy. And yet, because discrimination prevented her from gaining employment as an economist, her analysis of black working conditions and strategies for overcoming racial oppression and class-based inequality have not been included or examined within the economics profession. As Malveaux (1991) has noted, this represents a tragic loss to the discipline. This is a loss that need not be continued since Sadie Alexander's arguments have been preserved through her speeches and other writings stored at the University of Pennsylvania Archives.

Alexander's vision of economic justice remains relevant to improving the position of African Americans in the US political economy. Significant economic disparities between blacks and whites in the US have continued in the post-Civil Rights era. Black unemployment rates have consistently been more than double white unemployment rates since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began compiling unemployment data by race in 1972 (Mishel *et al.* 2007). Black poverty rates are also over twice as high as white rates (24.9 percent vs. 10.6 percent) and over a third of black children live in poverty (US Census Bureau 2006). The gap in earnings and wealth between blacks and whites in the US has persisted: black median income is just 60 percent of white median income (\$35,594 vs. \$59,124) and the average black household has a net worth of just 19 percent of the average white household (Mishel *et al.* 2007). The distribution of wealth in the US is a reflection of cumulative and ongoing racial disadvantages for blacks and advantages for whites.

The alarming rise in black and Latino incarceration rates since the War on Drugs was implemented by President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s illustrates one way in which minority freedoms and rights have been curtailed during an era of economic insecurity.<sup>12</sup> Alexander's policy recommendations to safeguard minority rights through livable wages, public sector job creation, and redistributive policies that combat poverty remain not only relevant but also urgent.

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<sup>12</sup> A great deal has been written about the erosion of democratic rights and protections in the US as a result of the War on Drugs. One article that discusses these rights within the context of US racism is Graham Boyd (7/31/2001). [www.aclu.org/drugpolicy/racialjustice/10830pub20010731.html](http://www.aclu.org/drugpolicy/racialjustice/10830pub20010731.html). For detailed statistics on incarceration rates of US minorities, see Human Rights Watch's website: [www.hrw.org/background/usa/race/](http://www.hrw.org/background/usa/race/) and the Prison Policy Initiative's website: [www.prisonpolicy.org/graphs/index.shtml](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/graphs/index.shtml)

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