



## **BLACK FOLK AND THE ECONOMY – PROGRESS AND REGRESS BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX**

When the NAACP was founded in 1909, our nation was in the middle of an industrialization that would transform the labor market, and catapult the United States into world leadership, both militarily and financially. We were in the middle of a wave of immigration, with 37 million people coming to these shores between 1840 and 1920. We may also have been at a low point in race relations, since after Reconstruction there had been a systematic erosion of African American rights, especially voting and public accommodations rights. In 1906, an amateur anthropologist and head of the New York Zoological Society had a Congolese man, Ota Benga put on display at the Bronx Zoo, with apes and other animals, describing him as “the missing link”. In 2009, the New York Post published a cartoon that likened the President of the United States to a monkey! In 1904, Mary White Ovington (who would be the first chair of the NAACP Board of Directors) began a study of the economic situation for African Americans in New York. In 1908, a race riot (which some describe as a race war) broke out in Springfield, Illinois when an angry mob demanded law enforcement officers turn over a black man accused of sexually assaulting a white woman. The mob systematically destroyed the black business district and a poor black neighborhood.

There are interesting parallels between the economic times of 1909 and those of 2009. While significant progress has been made in a century, issues such as the absorption of immigrants into the United States seem to be rather permanent aspects of the economic dialogue. While we have elected an African American President of the United States, and while some African Americans have made tremendous economic strides, the African American unemployment rate remains twice as high as the white rate, and one in four African Americans live in poverty. The economy was restructuring due to industrialization in 1909. Now, deindustrialization and globalization are driving another economic restructuring, actually an economic denouement of the United States. Just as the seeds of our nation’s economic ascendancy were sown in 1909, absent intervention we can surely see our nation’s economic descendancy. The euro is more highly traded than the dollar is, and China, India and Eastern Europe are producing more engineers than the United States of America.

The contemporary economy can be no more challenging than the economy that African Americans experienced in 1909. Yet the economic crisis of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, precipitated by the mortgage meltdown, the weakening of the financial services industry, and the failure of General Motors reminds us of the peripheral status that many African Americans have in the economy. As unemployment rates soar, African Americans experience a “real” unemployment rate that has depression-era proportions. African Americans are less likely to have pensions or health insurance than others, and African American youth are in crisis. Our historically black colleges and universities, which still educate a disproportionate number of African American people, face financial challenges that are exacerbated by the weakness of our economy. There are opportunities for economic expansion around greening and community investment, but African Americans will only benefit from

these new opportunities if we aggressively advocated targeted possibilities for our community. The need for speed in the context of stimulus buttresses the status quo and disadvantages communities that may not have developed "shovel ready" projects.

African American women play a vital role in the economic health of our nation, just as we did in 1909, when the NAACP was founded. Then, the colored women's club movement was in its ascendancy, with African American women voicing concern about both the uplift of the race and the adequacy of employment opportunities for African Americans. Today, African American women play key roles in advocating for social and economic justice.

Still, it is amazing that on economic matters, the more things change the more they stay the same. African American women are celebrating the appointment of the first black woman CEO of a Fortune 500 company in Ursula Burns. And, the rate of black women's business ownership is rising. Yet this recession is a reminder that economic justice has yet to be attained and that some of the challenges the NAACP faced in 1909 remain challenges today.