

African American Cooperatives

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AAs - Forced Migration & Underdevelopment

- African descended population, forced to migrate to Americas, originally enslaved; eventually left in poorest rural and urban areas;
- Discriminated from jobs, housing, capital.
- High unemployment, low income, poor health access and outcomes, lower education levels, low wealth.
- Internal colonization

Economic Cooperation as a Strategy for subaltern economic self –determination

■ Du Bois:

We can by consumers and producers co-operation, . . . establish a progressively self-supporting economy that will weld the majority of our people into an impregnable, economic phalanx.

If leading the way as intelligent cooperating consumers, we rid ourselves of the ideas of a price system and become pioneer servants of the common good, we can enter the new city as men and not mules.

Economic Marginalization and Segregation

- Forced segregation made it imperative that African Americans join together economically, because the mainstream economy was exploitative, discriminatory, and exclusionary.
- Voluntary segregation was often the way to maintain economic independence and control self help efforts –maroons, communal societies.

Self Help Ideology

- Marginalization forces subaltern groups such as African Americans to find alternative economic solutions.
- Desire and need for self-help, economics under their own control
- Chance to design & manage needed goods & services in culturally, racially & geographically sensitive ways.
- Hire members of the group, keep money circulating in the community, community benefit from economic development.

Gains

- Informal cooperation, and economic solidarity (often hidden or ignored by mainstream and community – often too dangerous)- pre and post colonization
- Provide jobs within the group, raise level of work
- Provide goods and services can't get elsewhere
- Anchor economic development
- Address marginalization and discrimination
- Celebrate and market their culture

African American Grassroots Economic Organizing

- Free and enslaved African Americans shared resources; pooled money to buy their own and their family members' freedom, started independent schools, etc.
- Created communities, enclaves, Black businesses and other economic activity insulated from racial discrimination & neglect.
 - Established mutual aid societies -to help cover costs of illness and death, widows and orphans....
 - Less well known aspect integral to the Long Civil Rights movement.

AA Co-op Movement parallels Civil Rights Movement

- When tell African American co-op history, many of the players are the same as those who became famous for Civil Rights Activity.
- Early interest in cooperatives as a strategy for economic independence.
- Some Black leaders got their start in the co-op movement. Some found co-ops as only viable alternative.

Black Co-op Advocates

- W.E.B. Du Bois
- A. Philip Randolph
- Marcus Garvey
- George Schuyler
- Ella Jo Baker
- John Hope II
- E. Franklin Frazier
- Jacob Reddix
- Nannie Helen Burroughs
- Chancellor Williams
- Halena Wilson
- Father A. McKnight
- Estelle Witherspoon
- John Lewis
- James Foreman
- Fannie Lou Hamer
- Dorothy I. Height
- Nation of Islam
- Federation of Southern Cooperatives

Late 1800s

- Knights of Labor organized multiracial cooperatives.
- The Colored Farmers National Alliance and Cooperative Union (1886-1891) established cooperative stores/ “exchanges”;
- And organized to counter exploitation by white land owners, and violence by vigilantes (KKK).
- Often had to operate underground to stay safe.

Colored Merchants Association

- Founded by the Nat'l Negro Business League, Montgomery, AL 1927.
- Association of independent grocers organized into a buying and advertising cooperative.
- To support independent Black grocery stores in a harsh market (chain stores).
- 1930-253 stores in the CMA Network.

1930s

- 1930s very active period for cooperatives – depression increased need for cooperative grassroots economic activity.
- Throughout the 1930s and 1940s there were Black farmers' cooperatives, credit unions, co-op grocery stores, schools, etc.
- Ella Baker and George Schuyler developed the Young Negroes' Cooperative League in 1930 to promote cooperatives in Black communities.

Federation of Southern Co-ops

- Founded in 1967 – to present
- Coalition of Civil Rights organizations with grassroots local activists – political rights not enough.
- Non-profit organization of state associations to support Predominantly Black cooperatives in southern states.
- Organic farming, marketing, agricultural processing, fishing, sewing, handicrafts, land buying, grocery, credit unions.
- Protect Black-owned land.
- Policy advocacy.

Role of Women

- Women involved in the co-ops and co-op movement, some historical relationship to women's leadership – because of need?

Freedom Quilting Bee

- Founding member of the FSC/LAF
- Sewing cooperative started in 1967 by sharecropping women to sell their quilts for extra income.
- Built a sewing plant, and provided other services to the community – child care center, after school programs, summer reading program.

FQB Econ Independence

- FQB bought 23 acres of land to build sewing factory and to help share croppers (evicted for registering to vote) to farm in peace and to own their own land.
- At its height with 150 members, the co-op was the largest employer in the town of Alberta, AL, in 1992.