

Living in the Country: Imagining Development and Remaking the Black Rural South,
1933-1986

Alec Fazackerley Hickmott
Redbourn, United Kingdom

B.A., University of Sussex, 2007
M.A., University of Virginia, 2010
M.Phil., University of Sussex, 2011

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There faces the American Negro, therefore, an intricate and subtle problem of combining into one object two difficult sets of facts—his present racial segregation which despite anything he can do will persist for many decades; and his attempt by carefully planned and intelligent action to fit himself into the new economic organization which the world faces.

--W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940)

There are enormous opportunities here for a new nation, a new Economy, a new culture in a South really new and not a mere renewal of an old South of slavery, monopoly and race hate. There is a chance for a new cooperative agriculture on renewed land owned by the State with capital furnished by the State, mechanized and coordinated with city life.

--W.E.B. Du Bois, "Behold the Land" (1947)

We are raising fundamental questions ... about how the poor sharecropper can achieve the Good Life, questions liberalism is incapable of answering.

--Bob Moses (c.mid-1960s)

A lot of people return to the South to die—I'm trying to convince people that it's possible to return here and live.

--Charles Bannerman (1978)

INTRODUCTION

Black Power and Black Politics *In the Age of Development*

On the pages of architectural renderings Soultech rose, like a phoenix from the ashes of southern history, into the verdant surrounds of the North Carolina countryside. The envisioned facility—a gleaming white, high modernist structure that shone in stark relief against the landscape of rural Warren County—was to be the economic centerpiece of “Soul City,” a planned community and brainchild of the former Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) director Floyd McKissick.¹ Far more than a utopian community or an exercise in racial separatism, as contemporary critics in the late 1960s and early 1970s claimed, Soul City—with the “industrial incubator facility” at its center—was to signal the beginnings of a broader, black-led effort to bring industrial development to the rural South. In early optimistic projections, it was believed that Soul City would eventually provide over eight thousand manufacturing jobs and support a population of over 45,000 people.² If successful, the project promised to bring economic growth to a type of space—heavily African American in population, agricultural and for the most part deeply impoverished—that had been bypassed by postwar southern development.³ For its most ardent supporters, Soul City represented a model of development capable of not only

¹ For the political history of Soul City, see Devin Fergus, “Black Power, Soft Power: Floyd McKissick, Soul City, and the Death of Moderate Black Republicanism,” *Journal of Policy History* 22:2 (2010), 148-192.

² Warren Regional Planning Corporation, “Industrial and Economic Development Prospectus,” 15 Nov 1972. Box 78, Floyd McKissick Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

³ The seminal treatment of this topic remains Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

transforming the terms of black economic life in Warren County, but potentially advancing a more democratic, egalitarian version of capitalist enterprise for the South as a whole.

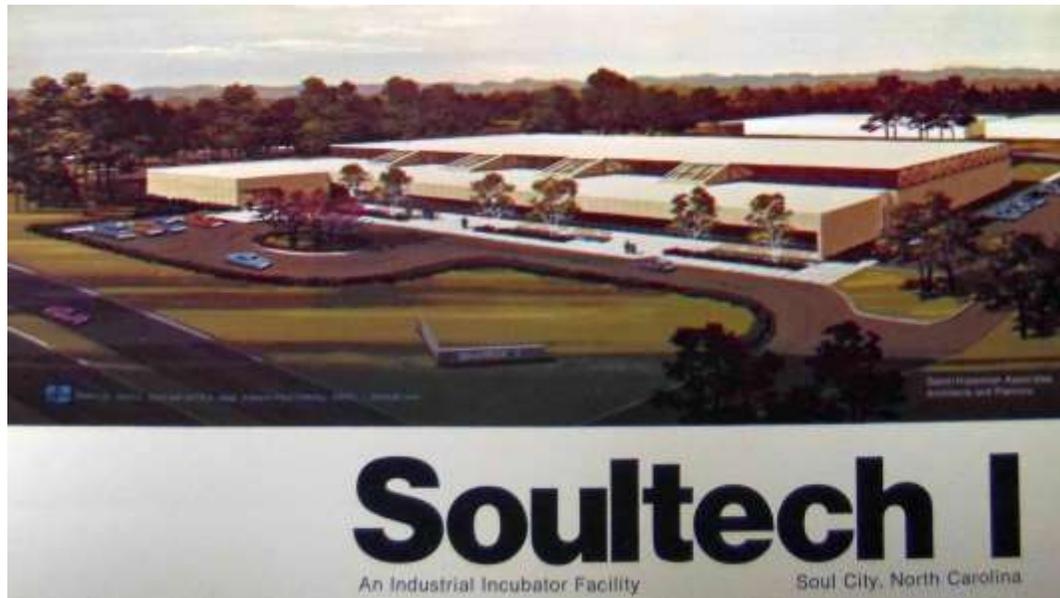


Figure 0.1. “Soultech I.”⁴

Though Warren County was located only fifty miles northeast of the Raleigh-Durham metropolitan area, it was in most respects a world apart from one of the South’s key sites of postwar economic activity. Beginning in the early 1950s, plans to transform the foundations of North Carolina’s political economy had been initiated by a group that the political scientist V.O. Key identified in his classic 1949 text *Southern Politics* as the state’s “progressive plutocracy.”⁵ The cohort, which included a diverse cast of businessmen, politicians, university administrators and southern intellectuals, viewed their state as hopelessly mired in the economic legacies of the *ancien régime*. The key to North Carolina’s future prosperity, they argued, was to end the state’s continuing

⁴ “Soultech I,” FMP.

⁵ V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in the State and Nation* (New York: Vintage, 1949), 205-211.

dependence on low-wage agricultural and textile work. Though a stuttering effort throughout most of the 1950s, by 1959 the coalition had raised the both the capital and political will necessary to establish what would become known as the Research Triangle Park. There, a new model of southern economic development would take shape that would, in a few short years, become a critical center of research, expertise and high wage enterprise. As one observer has argued, the RTP quickly became “the South’s most successful high-technology venture.”⁶

Clearly modeled on the RTP, Soul City was an effort to harness the modernizing ethos of an ascendant Sunbelt South, by transplanting proven economic models into rural spaces where, as late as the early 1970s, 25 percent of the national black population still resided.⁷ At the initial planning conference for the project, held at Howard University in 1969, organizers noted that “Soul City” was “created for the purpose of black ownership and also to inspire black capitalism, and ... to create economic development for the many instead of a few.”⁸ In this regard, the two projects dramatized the polarities of southern development during the postwar era as the region became increasingly industrialized and, to many observers, “modern.” But in another regard, the hopes embodied in the planning for Soul City indicated that even at the radical apex of the Black Power era, there existed a powerful strand of African American thought that framed black economic

⁶ Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 216; for a historical overview of the RTP, see Mac McCorkle, “History and the ‘New Economy’ Narrative: The Case of Research Triangle Park and North Carolina’s Economic Development,” *The Journal of the Historical Society* XII:4 (December 2012), 479-525; William B. Hamilton, “The Research Triangle of North Carolina: A Study in leadership for the Common Weal,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 65 (Spring 1996), 254-278; Albert N. Link, *A Generosity of Spirit: The Early History of the Research Triangle Park* (Research Triangle Foundation of North Carolina, 1995).

⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *The Social and Economic Status of Negroes in the United States, 1970* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 5-21.

⁸ “Soul City Conference at Howard University, 1969,” p. 7; folder 6571, box 292, Series 2.3, FMP.

emancipation—and indeed, the future of the South—in a *lingua franca* of liberal-democratic capitalism.

An intellectual and institutional history of African American development efforts in the twentieth century, *Living in the Country: Imagining Development and Remaking the Black Rural South, 1933-1986* traces how a coalition of activists, intellectuals and businessmen sought to address the longstanding marginalization of rural black communities in the American South. Beginning in the New Deal era—or alternatively, as I argue, at the dawn of the “Age of Development”—this study examines how agricultural modernization and rural enterprise came to be understood as the *sine qua non* of racial empowerment. Through cooperative agricultural initiatives, land retention efforts, rural industrialization and the creation of new black-controlled financial institutions, this coalition sought to establish a new geography of regional development that could affirm the material aspirations of communities which had long existed under the heel of Jim Crow capitalism.⁹

Primarily, this study examines how the African American freedom struggle was shaped by—and responded to—the policies, discourses and material consequences of economic modernization in the rural South. It explores how various African American intellectuals and activists, who collectively comprised a tradition of thought and practice I term “black developmentalism,” imagined a future economic order in the shadow of the plantation.¹⁰ Crucially, they articulated a vision of black economic modernity defined by

⁹ In this study, I modify “racial capitalism” to “Jim Crow Capitalism” as a way of identifying, in more specific and historical terms, rural African Americans’ relationship to the South’s evolving political economy. For the seminal work on “racial capitalism,” however, see Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

¹⁰ For the seminal history of the plantation complex and its impact on African American life, see Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London: Verso, 1998).

a liberation from the structures of subordination that had historically governed black economic life in the countryside. As both a political project and claim-making strategy, black developmentalism promised to address material inequality while holding American liberalism accountable to its central promises of universal equality and economic security. Black developmentalism's allure also lay in its political legibility to liberals ostensibly committed to race-neutral economic growth. Yet black developmentalism was also a heretical project; a crucial dimension of African American freedom struggle, it consistently exposed the intimate ties between racial inequality, agricultural enterprise, regional development, and the modern liberal state. As such, this dissertation is also a story about the consistent neglect of African American developmental aspirations, and a case study in the ways the emancipatory potential of a supposed human universal—"development"—was circumscribed by the endemic, racialized conflicts over power, resources and property at the heart of modern American life.

In exploring this history, *Living in the Country* sits at the intersection of a number of scholarly literatures, including black freedom studies, southern history, the history of capitalism, rural studies and historically-oriented work on the question of global development.

At least since the publication of William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (1980) and Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (1981), historians have mined archives, newspapers and oral histories to lay out the contours of the civil rights movement.¹¹ To date, most studies focused on the southern wing of the black

¹¹ Classic works on the southern civil rights movement include Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Aldon D. Morris,

freedom struggle have emphasized the grassroots nature of organizing, indigenous notions of freedom, and the ways in which local people attempted to transform the terms of their existence. In a similar vein, intensive local studies have deployed the tools of social history to illuminate the contours of both civil rights organizing and the structure of white opposition in individual communities.¹² A culmination of these two broad interpretative trajectories is perhaps best represented by the publication of Hasan Kwame Jeffries' *Bloody Lowndes* (2009), a longitudinal study of Lowndes County, Alabama. Jeffries' analysis centers "freedom rights"—which he identifies as the "assortment of civil and human rights that emancipated African Americans identified as the crux of freedom."¹³ Such scholarship has transformed how scholars have interpreted civil rights politics, and mounted a successful and far-reaching challenge to what Charles Payne has

The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1984); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012); Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009).

¹² Local histories of the civil rights movement include William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1981); Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Richard A. Cuoto, *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: The Pursuit of Racial Justice in the Rural South* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992); Françoise N. Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012);

¹³ As an explanatory concept, however, "freedom rights" threatens to stretch the terms of "black freedom studies" beyond its historical value; Jeffries argues: "Framing the civil rights movement as a fight for freedom rights acknowledges the centrality of slavery and emancipation to conceptualizations of freedom; incorporates the long history of black protest dating back to the daybreak of freedom and extending beyond the Black Power era; recognizes African Americans' civil and human rights objectives; and captures the universality of these goals. Moreover, it allows for regional and temporal differentiation, moments of ideological radicalization, and periods of social movement formation." See Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 4.

called a “normative mysticism” that had previously centered charismatic leadership, landmark events and political moderation in histories of the movement.¹⁴

A second crucial imperative of recent civil rights scholarship has revolved around Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s notion of a “long” civil rights movement. De-centering the “classical” period that had so animated early civil rights scholarship,¹⁵ Hall argued that the movement must be framed in broader temporal terms, and in ways that are more attentive to the ideological diversity (here, read radicalism) of black freedom struggles historically.¹⁶ In many respects, Hall’s intervention gave name to much earlier efforts to re-conceptualize the “movement” as the “Black Freedom Struggle,” and to a wave of scholarship that traced the movement’s origins ever further back in time, toward the dawn of the twentieth century and beyond.¹⁷ This argument, however, has also provoked a vigorous reassessment of movement scholarship’s intellectual parameters and theoretical underpinnings. Recently, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang have critiqued the ahistorical tendencies of the long movement proponents toward “expanding periodization schemas, erasing conceptual differences, and eliminating regional distinctions.”¹⁸ Indeed,

¹⁴ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 432.

¹⁵ Historians generally consider the “classical” period of the movement to be 1954-1965.

¹⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91:4 (2005), 1233-1263.

¹⁷ Exemplars of the “long movement” framework include Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America* (Jackson, MS: The University Press of Mississippi, 2007); Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Greta De Jong, *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Lost and Found: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 75 (Dec. 1988), 786-811; Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is A Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America Since 1941* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990); Stephen Tuck, *We Ain’t What We Ought To Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *The Journal of African American History* 92:2 (2007), 284.

no trend has been more indicative of the turn that Cha-Jua and Lang describe than the growing attention to the “northern civil rights movement,” which, while adding immeasurably to scholars’ understanding of the diversity of the black freedom struggle has, the authors argued, flattened the distinctiveness of liberation efforts in the South.¹⁹

Conversely, the tendency toward geographic expansion has been far less apparent in scholarship on the Black Power movement, where particular spatial conventions largely govern the field. Now christened “Black Power Studies,” scholarship on the so-called “nationalist” turn in African American politics has become a significant domain of inquiry in its own right.²⁰ But the emergence of the field—which evinces a tendency to frame itself as an alternative to work on the civil rights movement that unreasonably granted primacy to black liberal politics—has itself generated a range of new conceptual barriers. Indeed, much of the extant work on Black Power has all too frequently remained

¹⁹ For a synthetic account of northern civil rights, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York, NY: Random House, 2009); see also Richard M. Dalfiume, “The Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution,” *Journal of American History* 55 (June 1968), 90-106; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Peniel E. Joseph, “Waiting Till the Midnight Hour: Reconceptualizing the Heroic Period of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965,” *Souls* 2 (Spring 2000), 6-17; Peter B. Levy, *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland* (Gainseville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2003). Ironically, the emergence of the term “black freedom struggle” can be explained in part because of anxieties about the nationalizing of southern civil rights and, conversely, a critique of the dichotomous framing of “civil rights” and “Black Power.” For the former deployment of the term “black freedom struggle,” see Clayborne Carson, “Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle,” in Charles W. Eagles, ed., *The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 19-32. For the latter, see Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005), 3.

²⁰ For an overview of the field, see Peniel Joseph, “The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* (December 2009), 751-776. Other important works include Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York, 2006); Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York, 2003); Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley, CA, 2013); Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level* (New York, 2010); William L. Van Deburg, *A New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago, IL, 1993); Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) & Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

focused on the urban North and West. Indeed, this proclivity is itself a product of normative assumptions about the relationship between urban life and African American political modernity that are quite at odds with much of the archival record examined in this dissertation.²¹ In contrast this study, by reading black developmentalist politics as a response to the economic logics of agricultural modernization, defines the rural South as a critical terrain of Black Power activism.²² Moreover, this study draws attention to the centrality of *place*, *ideas* about place and the economic relations that *produced* space, in animating African American empowerment efforts. For advocates of black developmentalism, the dilemmas of African American modernity and its vexed relationship to the organization of American capitalism were best observed, theorized and addressed in rural spaces. As *Living in the Country* argues, this broadly shared epistemological tendency cemented an understanding of the black rural South as a privileged site in the larger black freedom struggle.

By illuminating a tradition of theory and practice centered on the question of rural development, *Living in the Country* fuses the field of Black Freedom Studies with the so-

²¹As Komozi Woodard notes in his classic work on Newark “the chief sources of contemporary black nationality formation are urban.” See Woodard, *Nation within a Nation*, 5. Notably, Woodard—himself a veteran of Black Power-era economic activism—deploys “modernization” in normative, sociological terms in *Nation Within a Nation*, suggesting the extent to which developmental discourses pervade (and influence) scholarship on the black freedom struggle.

²² For examples of scholarship attentive to the southern (if not necessarily rural) cadences of Black Power, see Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, PA, 2006); Donna Murch, “When the Panther Travels: Race and the Southern Diaspora in the History of the BPP, 1964-1972,” in *Black Power Beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement*, ed. Nico Slate (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012); Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). For an essay exhorting the need to re-center the South in black freedom studies, and to take space seriously in the writing of social movement histories, Clarence Lang, “Locating the Civil Rights Movement: An Essay on the Deep South, Midwest, and Border South in Black Freedom Studies,” *Journal of Social History* 47:2 (Winter 2013), 371-400.

called “new” history of capitalism.²³ On the one hand, the recent surge in scholarship on the contours of modern American capitalism has—with some notable exceptions—largely eschewed considerations of race while simultaneously reasserting the historical primacy of white actors and white controlled institutions.²⁴ Conversely, work in Black Freedom Studies has been nearly silent on the capitalist-oriented visions of African American historical actors.²⁵ By centering African American intellectual history, *Living in the Country* contributes to a relatively underdeveloped subfield of civil rights and, to a lesser extent, Black Power scholarship.²⁶ Moreover, this study makes the case that historians must take seriously the study of black economic thought, particularly the ways in which ideas about economic modernization and development were central to defining the substance and imagined endpoint of black political modernity. Rather than seeing the question of economic justice as a late turn in civil rights discourse, this study instead argues that the limitations of liberal economic policies with respect to African American

²³ For an overview of this (re)emergent field, see Sven Beckert et al., “Interchange: The History of Capitalism,” *The Journal of American History* 101:2 (2014), 503-536.

²⁴ Notable exceptions include Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014); N.D.B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Andrew Kahrl, *The Land is Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). On the need to integrate race into histories of capitalism, see Nathan B.D. Connolly, “Notes on a Desegregated Method: Learning from Michael Katz and Others,” *Journal of Urban History* 41:4 (2015), 1-8; Peter James Hudson, “African Diaspora Studies and the Corporate Turn,” *ASWAD Forum* 1 (2013), 1-2.

²⁵ On the terms of “black freedom studies,” see Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 288. One critical exception to this scholarly tendency is Laura Warren Hill and Julia Rabig, eds., *The Business of Black Power: Community Development, Capitalism, and Corporate Responsibility in Postwar America* (Rochester, NY, 2012).

²⁶ As Charles Eagles notes in a proactive critique, “the intellectual history of the black freedom struggle has received scant attention. The formal ideas and ideologies of the people involved at all levels in the movement as well as their unarticulated assumptions and beliefs warrant serious analysis.” See Charles W. Eagles, “Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era,” *The Journal of Southern History* 66:4 (Nov., 2000), 834. Recent exceptions to this almost exclusively revolve around the thought and theology of Martin Luther King, Jr. See David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

lives and aspirations had long been understood in developmental terms.²⁷

Finally, by centering the beating modernist heart of black activism in the rural South, *Living in the Country* offers a critique of much of the extant literature on southern agriculture and African American life. For the most part, scholarship on the history of black rural life in the post-World War II era has hewed to a familiar teleology of inevitable decline, centering an all-too simplistic picture of rural black life defined solely by tradition, poverty, helplessness and a belated, if ineffectual resistance to the forces of modernity.²⁸ In the work of Pete Daniel, for instance, historic USDA discrimination flows logically into a characterization of black rural life as a “landscape of broken promises.”²⁹ Yet by shifting the focus of African American agricultural history away from farmers toward an intellectual history of rural development strategies and institution building, it is possible to recover the contours of a progressive, capitalist-oriented political movement that was compelled by neither a commitment to an agrarian vision of the past nor, crucially, upended by its resistance to the economic modernization of the South.

It is tempting, of course, to believe that the problem of development has been, historically, confined to a world beyond the borders of the United States. As such, it is all too easy to forget that the Age of Development was in fact, as numerous scholars have

²⁷ For an exception to this general characterization, see Risa Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²⁸ For instance, one noteworthy volume beautifully synthesizes all that is wrong with interpretations of black rural life. The volume stops in 1950, includes essays on rural to urban migration and anti-agrarian black thought, while noting that “by 1960, African American farmers had become nearly irrelevant.” See R. Douglas Hurt, ed., *African American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

²⁹ Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 6.

begun to recognize, born in the American South.³⁰ With the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1933, New Deal policymakers established a model of agricultural modernization that combined state planning, investment and expertise in an effort to transform the life in the upper South. Moving quickly from the American to the Global South, New Deal liberalism exported not only ideas about development but also personnel; from the TVA, USDA and other agencies a flood of technocrats moved on to the United Nations, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and other key institutions of America's global postwar hegemony.³¹ As James Scott has argued in his seminal work *Seeing Like a State*, "The model and promise of American agricultural modernism was absolutely hegemonic in the three decades from 1945 to 1975."³²

The Age of Development, however, was not just a material project defined by the dissemination of resources from the "developed" to the "underdeveloped" world or, put another way, from the Global North to the Global South. It was also an intellectual project that presented a theory of historical change and identified the conditions under which that change would take place. Indeed, development studies were a central engine of the evolution of American social science, particularly in the postwar era. As the economic historian John Kenneth Galbraith recalled of the 1950s, "no economic subject more quickly captured the attention of so many as did the rescue of the people of the poor

³⁰ David Ekbladh, "'Mr. TVA': Grass-Roots Development, David Lilienthal, and the Rise and Fall of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a Symbol for U.S. Overseas Development, 1933-1973," *Diplomatic History* 26:3 (2002), 335-374.

³¹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 270; on the role of New Deal technocrats in international development policy, see Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 40-65; Ekbladh, "'Mr. TVA.'"

³² Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 270.

countries from their poverty.”³³ Though there were numerous valences, classic early works in the field of development consistently defined their subject as the processes which facilitated the transition from “tradition” to “modernity.” Both conditions were, in classic developmental formulations, largely static and defined by their uniformity. In the world of tradition, agriculture, illiteracy, economic inefficiency and undemocratic institutions defined social life; in the world of modernity, significant urbanization, literacy, economic productivity, industrialism and robust democratic institutions would prevail.³⁴

In the 1950s and 1960s, it was social scientists—waving the flag of “modernization theory”—that took the lead in defining the criteria of postwar progress, while specifying the precise model of modern convergence to be emulated: the United States. The anthropologist Arturo Escobar dates the simultaneous invention of “development” and the “Third World” to 1949, when a World Bank mission to Columbia—the first of its kind—laid out a plan for a “multitude of improvements and reforms.”³⁵ But it was during the late 1950s and early 1960s that modernization theory reached its apex, as scholars, technocrats and State Department officials pushed an interrelated “package” of changes—in economic organization, political structures and social values—which they believed held the potential to transform the world. For Daniel Lerner, the essential modern personality was “striving.” Other advocates exhorted

³³ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Nature of Mass Poverty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 29.

³⁴ Classic texts in the field include W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (New York, NY: 1960); Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958); Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963).

³⁵ Arturo Escobar, “Power and Visibility: Development and the Invention and Management of the Third World,” *Cultural Anthropology* 3:4 (Nov., 1988), 428-429.

industrialism as a precondition to new modes of existence; for most, economic growth would become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to a cascade of other positive changes, not least in the reformed consciousness of formerly “traditional” people. Market economies, secularization, political participation and progress were linked together in ways that were intoxicating to a broad swathe of American elites.³⁶ In turn, modernization theory became the ideological foundation of the United States’ Cold War foreign policy, particularly during the administration of President John F. Kennedy. And, as Michael Latham notes, it defined American national identity—and American liberalism—in fundamental ways: “Modernization ... was thus an element of American culture, an ideology shared by many different officials, theorists, and media sources about the nation, its historical ‘development,’ and its ability to transform the ‘less developed’ around it.”³⁷

Yet the teleology of modernization theory did not go unchallenged, particularly in the Global South. Equally important and influential a framework was that of dependency theory, a product primarily of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA). In the 1950s and 1960s, ECLA economists countered modernization advocates by arguing that the poverty of the non-western world could be explained in terms of a core-periphery model of economic relations. Simply put, such scholars argued that “underdevelopment” in the Global South was the direct consequence of western development. Resonating with nationalist energies in much of the post-colonial world, dependency economists argued that developmental projects in the “periphery” had to adopt different rules, models and

³⁶ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 120-121.

³⁷ Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 13.

practices than the developed world had. In time, industrialization, inward-oriented development programs and protectionist trade policies became hallmarks of this paradigm.³⁸

Yet such questions were not just the domain of far-flung lands and post-colonial polities. By the early 1960s, this critique of western progress and western economic proscription had begun to seep into African American political discourse, and to be applied to the question of race relations in the United States. A case in point was the work of Harold Cruse, whose 1962 essay “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American,” pointedly framed the “race question” in developmental terms. African Americans’ vexed status was “much more than a problem of racial discrimination,” Cruse argued. “It is a problem of political, economic, cultural, and administrative underdevelopment.”³⁹ Collapsing the language of dependency theory and the cultural baggage of modernization theory, Cruse noted that “like the peoples of the underdeveloped countries, the Negro suffers in varying degree from hunger, illiteracy, disease, ties to the land, urban and semi-urban slums, cultural starvation, and the psychological reactions to being ruled over by others not of his kind.” Undoubtedly, Cruse’s essay showed the growing imbrication of black intellectual thought with emergent developmental paradigms. Indeed, questions of development provided an intellectual bridge to the Black Power era. As this study argues, the “internal colony” thesis was not only rooted in an anti-imperialist, “Third World” critique of the “global color line,” which was most visible in its commitment to

³⁸ On the emergence and evolution of dependency theory, see Andre Gunder Frank, “The Development of Underdevelopment,” in James D. Cockcroft, et. al., eds., *Dependence and Underdevelopment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972), 3-17.

³⁹ Harold Cruse, “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American,” *Studies on the Left* 2:3 (1962); reprinted in Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution* (New York, NY: William Morrow & Company, 1968), 74-96.

overthrow the capitalist world system.⁴⁰ Rather, the diagnosis of black Americans' colonized status both legitimated and spurred, as it did in many other parts of the decolonizing world, developmental solutions to poverty that were themselves, to varying degrees, the product of the norms, institutions and practices of the United States' postwar ascendancy.

By locating the evolution of the black freedom struggle in the historical and epistemological landscape of development, this study adds a fundamentally new dimension—and analytical framework—to the ongoing “internationalization” of African American history. This field has undergone a spectacular growth in recent years, assessing the global reverberations of the civil rights struggles, the centrality of human rights and transnational solidarities to black political imaginings, as well as assessing the strategic ways organizations such as the NAACP navigated Cold War-era international politics.⁴¹ Yet almost nothing has been said about the relationship between domestic black politics and one central pillar of the postwar world order: development.

⁴⁰ With deep roots in black leftist politics going as far back as the Community Party's “Black Belt thesis,” by the 1960s the internal colony thesis had been transplanted to the urban North. Popularized by the Black Panther Party, proponents of the thesis saw the “ghetto” as a reservoir of cheap, exploitable labor that had historically been denied access to the capital necessary to generate its own economic development. On the concept, see Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1970); Cynthia Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); for a succinct overview, see Rabig and Hill, *Business of Black Power*, 40.

⁴¹ Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). For other key works in the “transnational” turn in African American history, see Robing D.G. Kelley, “But a Local Phase of a World Problem: Black History's Global Vision, 1883-1950,” *The Journal of American History* 86:3 (Dec., 1999), 1045-1077; Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956-1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Herbert Timothy Lovelace, Jr., “International Legal History from Below: The Civil Rights Movement and the U.S. Origins

For the historical actors considered in this study, however, development was less a global abstraction than a fundamentally local problem. This was no coincidence. With no apparent contradiction, the institutions of the modern liberal state that had so forcefully articulated ideals of modernization, democratic capitalism and human rights to the post-colonial world had, simultaneously, done little to realize similar black aspirations in the rural South. As a litany of scholars have noted, the role of the federal government was central in propagating a version of economic modernization which, while rescuing the profitability of southern agriculture from the doldrums of the Depression, did much to sever African Americans' ties to the land and secure the future dominance of capital-intensive, corporate agricultural production.⁴² Moreover, the New Deal coalition's reliance on the political power of southern Democrats guaranteed the preservation of the region's most exploitative and regressive economic structures.⁴³ Though recent work has attempted to rehabilitate the democratic pretensions of state-led planning in the New Deal era, it remains broadly accurate that rural African Americans were largely excluded from the benefits and protections of New Deal liberalism.⁴⁴

As Bruce Schulman argues, the economic transformations of the South between the 1930s and 1980s indicate the linked commitment of the federal government and

of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1960-1965," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia, 2012.

⁴² On the political economy of the modern rural South, see Woods, *Development Arrested*; Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

⁴³ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York, NY: Liveright, 2014).

⁴⁴ Jess Gilbert, *Planning Democracy: Agrarian Intellectuals and the Intended New Deal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); on the racial exclusions of New Deal reform, see Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2005).

southern elites to a model of development he identifies as “growth-oriented” liberalism.⁴⁵ Earlier, the most optimistic of southern liberals saw development as a way to undermine the region’s longstanding investment in a political economy based on racial subordination.⁴⁶ Following the end of reform, however, the version of American liberalism propagated during the 1940s and 1950s, as Schulman notes:

stressed economic growth rather than redistribution ... Keynesian economic management had become the tool of their trade; prosperity their principal economic object. This renewed faith in American capitalism, like support for civil rights, was linked to the era’s pervasive anti-communism. Liberals sought to demonstrate the superiority—economic, political, and spiritual—of democratic capitalism to totalitarian communism.⁴⁷

And no region benefited more from this emergent pro-growth consensus than the American South, where federal investment and the institutionalization of a private-public partnership formed a model of developmental regionalism which did little to alter and indeed likely exacerbated—profound racial and economic inequalities.⁴⁸

But as the rural South changed, so too did black politics. In the shadows of liberal growth, another politics was coalescing. As growth-oriented liberals threw political and policy weight behind a strategy of agricultural modernization that cemented the power of powerful, white economic interests either antagonistic or indifferent to racial equality, a counter-narrative had emerged that emphasized the potential of rural development to dissolve the economic foundations of southern race relations. As Harry Haywood, a

⁴⁵ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 188; on the dogma of growth more generally in U.S. society and politics, see Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁶ See chapter 1.

⁴⁷ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 127-128; on the decline of New Deal reform impulses, see Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1995).

⁴⁸ On the public-private dimensions of the modern developmental state, see Brent Cebul, “Developmental State: The Politics of Business, Poverty and Economic Empowerment from the New Deal to the New Democrats,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia, 2014.

radical critic of the southern political economy noted in 1948, the “Negro Question” was “agrarian in origin.”⁴⁹ Yet beginning at least as early as the 1920s, an ideologically diverse dialogue on the impact of economic modernization policies emerged in African American public life that involved a wide range of civil rights critics, leftist intellectuals, social scientists and black southern moderates. Collectively, these voices contributed to the emergence of an evolving mode of political engagement—one this study refers to as “black developmentalism”—that endured long into the twentieth century as the modern liberal state continued to reshape both rural capitalism and the southern countryside, all the while remaining indifferent to African Americans increasingly vocal aspirations for human and economic development.

As *Living in the Country* argues, between the era of the New Deal and the era of Black Power, the black rural South emerged as a site of competing political, and developmental imaginaries, and the terrain of an ongoing contest over the terms—and future—of growth oriented American liberalism. Here, the context of international development work remained important. As much as in Vietnam, India or Colombia as in Plains, Georgia, the “village” was defined as a central locus of development work.⁵⁰ In local terms, however, black developmentalist politics evolved primarily as a critique of liberal economic policy and its human consequences. For SNCC organizer Bob Moses, the black rural South remained the “question liberalism is incapable of answering.”⁵¹ In turn, such efforts represented the material foundations of a larger ideological project: the

⁴⁹ Harry Haywood, *Negro Liberation* (New York: International Publishers, 1948), 11.

⁵⁰ Nicole Sackley, “The Village as Cold War Site: Experts, Development, and the History of Rural Reconstruction,” *Journal of Global History* 6 (2011), 481-504.

⁵¹ Robert Moses, quoted in John Dittmer, “The Politics of the Mississippi Movement, 1954-1964,” in Charles W. Eagles, ed., *The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 88.

recasting of black rural life and identity. Only by upending an economic regime invested in maintaining low-wage labor, this cohort argued, could a long-exploited, and long-stigmatized black collective be transformed into full American citizens.

Like representatives of other colonized groups, advocates embraced “development” as a way of framing black claims on the resources of federal government, private philanthropy and other potential fonts of support in a series of terms—capitalism, enterprise, sustainability, “self-help” and modernization—that were palatable to the liberal center of American politics. Thus, development offers a way to examine black politics’ evolving engagement with a worldview that the historian and mid-century liberal Arthur M. Schlesinger identified in 1948 as the “vital center” of American political life. In his 1948 text *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*, Schlesinger mounted a spirited defense of liberalism’s ability to tame the evils of class conflict and radicalism with prudent economic policies and regulations. As he argued:

the state should aim at establishing conditions for economic decisions, not at making all the decisions itself. It should create an economic environment favorable to private business policies which increase production; and then let the free market carry the ball as far as it can. Kenyes, not Marx, is the prophet of the new radicalism.⁵²

This definition undoubtedly opened intellectual and political space for black developmental claims and strategies that could be formulated in universal, rather than ethnocentric or particularistic terms. Yet in other respects, it was the ideological malleability of development that made it so compelling a doctrine for its proponents. On the one hand, development could serve as a tool of critique where necessary, exposing the

⁵² Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 182-183.

profound racial limits of economic modernization policies initiated at the federal, state and local levels that had historically excluded black communities. Simultaneously, however, it operated as a universal language of aspiration and racial uplift that, particularly in the Black Power era, could reframe a program of black economic populism in ways that could minimize accusations of radicalism or ethnocentrism.

To date, limited work on the question of development and African American history has, for the most part, uncritically adopted the terminology of the larger policy context in which development efforts were created; as such, terms such as “community development,” “black capitalism” and even “economic development” appear from the political ether.⁵³ Burdened with no intellectual genealogy, the terms are mobilized in ways which assume, without much grounding, that historical actors thought about “economics” and “civil rights” as separate domains of initiative. Furthermore, this study avoids adopting what some scholars have termed the postmodern—or “deconstructionist”—turn in development studies. In such work, “development” is read as a discursive technology that, rather than addressing poverty, in fact works principally to maintain existing global hierarchies, naturalize Euro-American modernity and define the “problem” of underdevelopment in ways the marginalize the pernicious effects of western capitalist development.⁵⁴ Finally, this study does not essentialize or reify oppositional, indigenous notion of development—what some scholars have chosen to

⁵³ Laura Warren Hill and Julia Rabig, *The Business of Black Power: Community Development, Capitalism, and Corporate Responsibility in Postwar America* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2012); moreover, Rabig and Hill’s introduction to their edited volume demonstrate the ongoing conceptual confusion with regard to the history of development, suggesting that “the phrase ‘internal colonialism’ conveys a relationship of economic exploitation, while ‘underdevelopment’ merely suggests a condition.” See Hill and Rabig, *Business of Black Power*, 40, f. 74.

⁵⁴ Though not without significant power and analytical insight, the classic iteration of this approach is Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

name as “alternative modernities”—defined by an emphasis on communality, justice and egalitarianism.⁵⁵

Rather, this study deploys what one observer of development studies calls a “historicist” approach, one that explores how the very universality of development discourses offered their proponents a powerful language with which to legitimize their appeals.⁵⁶ As Frederick Cooper, a major exponent of this approach notes:

What is underplayed in critical analyses of development discourses and projects is how much this way of thinking provided people ... with a basis for making claims—for economic resources, for political voice, for recognition of their existence as a nation among nations.⁵⁷

Thus it is far too simplistic, this study argues, to view the *longue durée* of black developmentalist politics as evidence for the incorporation of civil rights energies by the liberal center. Nor does black developmentalist politics represent the ongoing hegemony of capitalist norms and institutions. Rather, such efforts give powerful evidence for what

⁵⁵ This tendency, often present in work on global development has, in various ways, become embedded in the writing of African American history. But as Andrew Kahrl notes, “efforts to draw hard distinctions between a white and black ‘spatial imaginary’—the former associated with “hostile privatism and defensive localism,” the latter, ‘privileging use value over exchange values, sociality over selfishness, and inclusion over exclusion’—lead inevitably to romanticizing black life ... while downplaying the dynamism and divisiveness that accompanied African Americans’ efforts to claim space in a capitalist society.” See Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours*, 18.

⁵⁶ Nick Cullather, “Development? It’s History,” *Diplomatic History* 24:4 (2002), 641-643; “historicist” treatments of development are almost exclusively to be found in non-US literatures. See Barbara Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity: Sao Paulo and the Making of Race and Nation in Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Barbara Weinstein, “Developing Inequality,” *American Historical Review* (Feb., 2008), 1-18.

⁵⁷ Frederick Cooper, “Writing the History of Development,” *Journal of Modern European History* 8 (2010), 14.

one scholar has called the “expectations of modernity” that have frequently coursed through social movements and other popular efforts to enact developmental agendas.⁵⁸

As such, *Living in the Country* argues that only through a more nuanced, historical reading of African American development work is it possible to define how modernity—the world to come *after* segregation and the achievement of political equality—was understood within black political culture.⁵⁹ In a few short years following the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965), “development” had become a—if not *the*—central idiom of black political claims. Why was this? As this study argues, efforts to transform the rural South were at heart a project of imagining a different future; for rural African Americans, for the South and, ultimately, for the nation.⁶⁰ Remaking the rural South meant remaking American liberalism; moreover, it meant remaking American capitalism. As the empirical evidence in this study demonstrates, a version of black political modernity—formulated through a longstanding engagement with the history and political economy of the rural South—came to be equated with efforts to gain fair and equitable access to the promise of American capitalism.

In many respects, black developmentalism reflected an effort to inscribe in public policy what, in the domain of the black private sphere, had long been a central response to the indignities of Jim Crow segregation. From at least the dawn of the twentieth century, a precarious black middle-class politics in the South had combined

⁵⁸ James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copper Belt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵⁹ On “modernity,” see Lynn M. Thomas, “Modernity’s Failings, Political Claims and Intermediate Concepts,” *American Historical Review* 727-740; Frederick C. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 113-149.

⁶⁰ On histories of the future, see David Engerman, “Histories of the Future and the Futures of History,” *American Historical Review* 117:5 (2012), 1402-1410.

entrepreneurial efforts, progressive reform impulses and moral uplift as a way of harboring African American lives from the degradations of a hostile world. The turn “inward,” as Earl Lewis notes, fused questions of economic development and the black domestic sphere at the heart of segregated black life.⁶¹

As such, it is crucial to acknowledge the ways black developmentalist politics built on, yet in crucial ways departed from the Washingtonian paradigm of “race relations.” The seminal intellectual contribution of Booker T. Washington, as Michael West argues, was the intervention of “race relations” theory whose sorcery, the author notes, was to evoke a vision of progress wherein racial inequality could be parsed from American democracy and the history of American capitalist development. Like development it could, as West notes, “create two worlds out of one world of difficult, perhaps even intractable, conflict . . . offering up “the Negro’ as tabula rasa: a clean slate upon which a better future could be charted.”⁶² In much the same way, developmental paradigms offered a way to bridge the gap between material reality and human aspiration.

But the silences of race relations theory—on the role of the state, on the southern political economy and the power of recalcitrant white supremacy—also provided intellectual space for black developmentalist efforts. But it was only after 1965 that such efforts blossomed. Long ignored by federal, state and local agencies, rural development advocates seized on the War on Poverty which, despite its rather meager funding, had temporarily revived federal efforts to address economic inequality, particularly in the

⁶¹ Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 87.

⁶² Michael Rudolph West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington: American Democracy and the Idea of Race Relations* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 58.

South.⁶³ In just a few short years, what had been confined to the pages of academic inquiry or in the discursive realm of black public sphere burst forth in a wave of organizing and institution building that stretched from the Carolina Sea Islands to the Mississippi Delta. It is the time period between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s—what scholars usually call the Black Power era—which is the focus of four of this study’s five chapters.

As historical literature demonstrates, the Black Power movement emerged at a moment of crisis in the nation’s political economy, one that clearly tied the imperative of revitalizing the rural South to the deepening of the urban crisis. During the era of the second Great Migration between 1940 and 1970, over three million African Americans left the agricultural South for the promise of urban industrial labor.⁶⁴ Yet while postwar migration offered a form of cultural escape, it did not necessarily provide economic emancipation. By the late 1960s, urban labor markets were shrinking, while municipal social services groaned under the weight of declining tax bases, capital flight and escalating unemployment.⁶⁵ Drawing attention to what *Fortune* magazine in 1968 termed “The Southern Roots of the Urban Crisis,” Randolph Blackwell, a social scientist and early pioneer of the Southern Land Bank argued that structurally mismatched migrants’ inevitable fate was to arrive “in the festering center of some large city...Ready to rake

⁶³ On the War on Poverty in the South, see Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs: The North Carolina Fund and the Battle to End Poverty and Inequality in 1960s America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

⁶⁴ James N. Gregory, “The Second Great Migration: A Historical Overview,” in *African American Urban History: The Dynamics of Race, Class and Gender since World War II*, ed. Joe W. Trotter Jr. and Kenneth L. Kusmer (Chicago, IL, 2009), 10-38.

⁶⁵ On the political economy of the urban North, see Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

leaves where there are no trees; attend yards where there are no yards.”⁶⁶ Crucially, the deepening of the urban crisis brought black developmentalism into the intellectual and financial orbit of private philanthropy.⁶⁷ For liberal, white controlled institutions such as the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and others, rural development initiatives offered an opportunity to apply their resources and globally derived expertise to more local problems.⁶⁸ Moreover, “modernizing” potential southern migrants seemed, to both sides, a potential way to stem the rising tide of urban unrest in the late 1960s.⁶⁹

Other proponents echoed this deepening pessimism about black life in the urban North. As Soul City, promotional material proclaimed the soporific nature of “Rush Hour in Warren County,” where “There are no congested cities. Infuriating traffic jams. Or clammering commuter trains.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Robert Beardwood, “The Southern Roots of the Urban Crisis,” *Fortune* 78 (August 1968); Randolph T. Blackwell, “Out-Migration and Civil Disorder,” Speech delivered at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 16 October 1967, Southern Christian Leadership Conference Records, part 4, series II, reel 7, 144:28.

⁶⁷ As the archival record used in this study makes clear, it is near impossible to ignore the imprint of private philanthropy’s resources and institutional support.

⁶⁸ Taking a less geographically (and temporally) rigid approach to the study of Black Power is Rhonda Y. Williams, *Concrete Demands: The Search for Black Power in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2015). It is worth heeding Brenda Gayle Plummer’s warning, however, that “If Black Power is to mean anything, it cannot mean everything.” Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 17.

⁶⁹ Karen Ferguson, *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 23-48.

⁷⁰ “Rush Hour in Warren County,” box 81, FMP.



Figure 0.2. Rush Hour in Warren County.⁷¹

Soul City promised to be, for its residents, “fresh start.”⁷² The implicit juxtaposition of inhospitable urban environments against the tranquility, order and community offered by rural southern spaces was in part indicative of the broader loss of faith in the ameliorative or emancipatory potential of northern migration. In emphasizing both the economic possibility of rural spaces, the rehabilitative nature of rural life and the national implications of agricultural transformation, black developmentalist advocates offered a self-conscious alternative to contemporaneous celebrations of urban migration and the push for municipal self-government as a cornerstone of Black Power.

But more than anything, *Living in the Country* argues that the southern valences

⁷¹ “Rush Hour in Warren County,” box 81, FMP.

⁷² “Soul City Promotional Material,” box 81, FMP.

of Black Power were the product of the Age of Development.⁷³ This may seem, on the face of it, surprising. For instance, James Forman’s 1969 *Black Manifesto* has been seen by many as axiomatic of black radical politics, particularly in its centering of white supremacy and the political imperative of reparations. This framing, however, obscures the ways in which questions of power, empowerment, and justice were not fundamentally redefined by Black Power movement. It requires understanding the ways in which the *Black Manifesto*’s proscriptions were in part the product of an African American economist—Robert S. Browne—whose formative training was in economic development, and whose practical experience with questions of poverty were in southeast Asia as a representative of the US State Department.

In the late 1960s, Browne and the institution he created, the Emergency Land Fund (ELF), attempted to realize one crucial demand of the *Black Manifesto*: a southern land bank. Harmonizing with contemporaneous, nationalist claims to southern land, Browne argued that black owned farmland in the rural South represented the most viable—and valuable—foundation of racial capital. When viewed through the long history of black developmentalism, however, the land development strategies proposed by Browne align far better with what Nathan Connolly calls a “vision of freedom made from property and growth” than any extant paradigm for considering the particular politics of Black Power.⁷⁴

The disconnect becomes clearer if historians are willing to consider the ways in which Black Power projects increasingly engaged another consequence of the economic

⁷³ It must be noted, however precious few figures in the movement explicitly identified as “Black Power” advocates

⁷⁴ Connolly, *A World More Concrete*, 10.

policies of modern liberalism: the Sunbelt.⁷⁵ Assessing the Sunbelt's promise as a "New Frontier" of economic growth, ELF Executive Director Joseph Brooks wondered "how and through what means will blacks benefit from this growing prosperity...?"⁷⁶ In this context, landed development efforts were a uniquely malleable strategy that appropriated the ascendant Sunbelt ethos of free enterprise and economic growth while remaining rooted in the registers of empowerment and self-determination that were characteristic of the Black Power era. But proponents of black developmentalism envisioned organizations such as the ELF and others as institutional bulwarks of technical and legal assistance, credit and applied research that could establish a *détente* between the speculative land development practices of Sunbelt capitalism and the owners of African American property. Indeed, the urgency of maintaining black landholdings was intensified by an exponential rise in farmland prices in the early 1970s, which theoretically afforded rural African Americans unprecedented opportunity to participate in regional development. Absent the unlikely possibility of a massive, reparative transfer of wealth from white to black, land was appraised by advocates of the black southern strategy as an increasingly valuable—if largely dormant—source of racial equity. Indeed, such efforts were simply the latest iteration of a longstanding endeavor to fuse the material futures of rural African Americans to the modern liberal project and, ultimately, more fully realize the promise of democratic capitalism in the United States.

⁷⁵ For work on the rise of the Sunbelt, see James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1980* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1982); Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, PA, 2013); N.B.D. Connolly, "Sunbelt Civil Rights: Urban Renewal and the Follies of Desegregation in Greater Miami," in Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk, ed., *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Place, Space, and Region* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

⁷⁶ Joseph Brooks, "The Emergency Land Fund: A Rural Land Retention and Development Model," in Leo McGee and Robert Boone, eds., *The Black Rural Landowner—Endangered Species: Social, Political, and Economic Implications* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 117.

After the mid-1970s, however, “development” increasingly gave way to “business” and “enterprise” as the central idioms of black economic empowerment efforts. No organization embodied this transition more than the Delta Foundation, whose efforts to bring industrialization to the Mississippi Delta chart an ever more apparent tendency to equate liberation with enterprise in ways that erased the still-present racial contradictions at the heart of American capitalist development. Efforts to calibrate black empowerment projects toward an increasingly pro-enterprise state, however, were not without limitations as a strategy. As American political culture moved rightward so, inevitably, did black developmentalist politics. The internal logic of this tradition—that any attempt to direct resources toward a historically marginalized population had, at some level, to engage the discursive and policy landscape of American capitalist modernity—became an increasing prison over the course of the 1970s. Capitalism—once a source a hope and possibility—became a dogma that increasingly foreclosed more radical understandings of racial equity and defined liberation in entrepreneurial, pro-business terms.

Comprised of five chapters, *Living in the Country* examines the institutional and intellectual contours of black developmentalist politics. Chapter One explores, in brief, the long history of black developmentalist politics, while assessing the impact of federal economic policy on black life in the rural South. Firstly, this chapter outlines the trajectory of black rural life between the New Deal and the Civil Rights era, during which time the rural South saw significant transformations in demographics and labor organization. Reacting to these changes, however, black intellectuals had begun to examine the ways in which ostensibly progressive, “modernizing” state policies had

begun to fatally undermine the modest economic resources of southern black communities.

The final four chapters explore the repertoire of black developmentalism after 1965. Chapter Two examines the history of black land retention strategies in the modern South. Led by the African American economist Robert S. Browne and the institution he created, the Emergency Land Fund (ELF), land retention efforts anchored what Browne called in 1972 a “black southern strategy.” Subscribing to a theory of economic growth premised on capital accumulation, Browne and the ELF identified southern farmland as a vital, if quickly eroding economic resource that could potentially be leveraged in lieu of any meaningful federal, state or local support for black rural development efforts.

Chapter Three traces the history of the southern cooperative movement. Though an analysis of two key institutions—the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Southern Cooperative Development Fund—this chapter shows how efforts to modernize black farming practices and establish new, scale-intensive forms of agriculture modeled on ascendant agribusiness became central to black empowerment efforts in the rural South. A history of Black Power’s “Green Revolution,” the chapter demonstrates how black developmentalist efforts were influenced by international development frameworks, as well as emphasizing the critical role played by Israeli agricultural expertise, innovation and personnel. Indeed, cooperative organizers consistently rejected more communitarian models of rural reorganization in favor of market-oriented initiatives. Ultimately, the embrace of non-US expertise revealed the ongoing neglect of black agricultural enterprise in a political economy long committed to the interests of agribusiness and its attendant political interests.

Chapter Four offers an analysis of the ways black developmentalist politics attempted, in explicitly gendered terms, to articulate black economic empowerment efforts to the liberal anti-poverty community in the era of the War on Poverty. Using the work of former SCLC Program Director Randolph Blackwell and his organization, Southern Rural Action, this chapter illuminates the visual language of black developmentalism. In a political culture reshaped by the Moynihan Report, Southern Rural Action evoked images of disrupted, but potentially resolved black domestic life as a means of making developmental claims.

Finally, Chapter Five examines the history of black industrial development efforts in the post-civil rights Mississippi Delta. Through an analysis of the Delta Foundation, the chapter shows the promise and limits of black developmental efforts to replicate Sunbelt-era development practices in spaces defined by a historic reliance on plantation agriculture. In advocating for grassroots industrialism, the Delta Foundation established a model of commercial enterprise that informed later policy efforts to create “empowerment zones,” a recurrent response to the spatial limits of liberal economic policy. Moreover, it suggests the ways in which “enterprise” came to supplant considerations of race in the black developmental imaginary. As such, the chapter is suggestive of the ways the heretical impulses underlying black politics’ engagement with the liberal center could be imperiled as the terms of political discourse—and liberalism itself—shifted rightward. That subject is taken up, briefly, in the study’s conclusion.

CHAPTER 1

Questions Liberalism is Incapable of Answering

Economic Problems, Negro Problems, and the Making of the Modern Rural South

Readers of the National Emergency Council's 1938 *Report on Economic Conditions of the South* could be forgiven for assuming that Jim Crow and the broader history of southern race relations had little to do with the region's economic difficulties. In his oft-quoted introduction to the *Report*, President Franklin Roosevelt noted his belief that "the South presents right now the Nation's No. 1 economic problem—the Nation's problem, not merely the South's."¹ In large part, the President's rhetoric echoed the substance of the Council's final analysis. First and foremost, the *Report* emphasized the inter-regional nature of southern economic problems. A classic illustration of comparative advantage,² the *Report* contrasted the South's largely underutilized natural and human resources against the chasmic gulf in wages, education and health that persisted between the region and rest of the nation. Southerners, the *Report* noted, made less money, were less educated, lived shorter lives and had access to far fewer public services than the average American. In the process of naturalizing the regional distinctiveness of the South the *Report* elided the profound social divisions within the region that underpinned its aberrant political economy, while African Americans merited

¹ Franklin Roosevelt, quoted in U.S. National Emergency Council (hereafter USNEC), *Report on Economic Conditions of the South* (Washington, 1938), 1.

² A critical principle of liberal economics since the early nineteenth century, comparative advantages is generally viewed as a theory of trade that proceeds from a state's (or in the case of the South, a region's) recognition and exploitation of their own particular resource advantage, be it natural, human, geographical, ecological, etc. See Steven M. Suranovic, "The Theory of Comparative Advantage—Overview," <http://internationalecon.com/Trade/Tch40/T40-0.php>, accessed online 31 May 2015.

but two mentions in the document's 50-odd pages. Firstly, the document identified black southerners as disproportionate carriers of syphilis. Secondly, the report's authors reluctantly acknowledged race in the context of declining land tenancy in the South. The particularly acute impact of rural modernization on black southerners, however, merited no particular consideration. "Whites and Negroes," the *Report* argued, "have suffered alike" from the narrowing of the southern landowning class.³

Such an elision should be of no surprise to observers of the New Deal era. The *Report on Economic Conditions of the South* emerged from the deliberations of a small, yet increasingly vocal class of white liberal southern reformers who, in 1935, founded the Southern Policy Committee (SPC) in Atlanta, Georgia. Disenchanted with the regional *status quo* and finding a sympathetic ear in the Roosevelt administration, SPC liberals—a largely urban cohort that included academics, journalists, lawyers and other professionals—developed a critique of the nation's economic organization that framed the South's problems as the result of its fundamentally "colonial" economy. The source of the economic challenges facing the region, SPC liberals argued, was structural in nature, resulting from the South's commitment to the production of low-value raw materials and its reliance on the importation of high-cost manufactured goods produced elsewhere.

The notion of a South colonized by outside interests was not just the idiosyncratic preserve of the SPC. As Ira Katznelson has recently argued, an "equilibrium of silence"—or alternately what Nikhil Singh calls New Dealers' consistent "evasion" of the question of racial reform—was in fact a defining aspect of the era's economic

³ USNEC, *Report on Conditions*, 46.

policymaking and more broadly, the New Deal coalition itself.⁴ This discursive, political and policy framework emanated from the predominance of southern Democrats in Congress and on key congressional committees who comprised what Katzenelson calls the “southern cage.” Gatekeepers of this cage acquiesced to the intrusion of the federal government in economic matters, but only on the condition that New Deal reforms left Jim Crow segregation undisturbed.⁵

Other observers of the South, however, were less circumspect in their assessment of the root causes of the region’s economic problems. A decade later, the African American communist Harry Haywood argued that the particularities of the rural South’s political economy and the broader shape of American race relations were intimately connected. “The Negro Question,” Haywood declared emphatically in his 1948 text *Negro Liberation*, “was agrarian in origin.”⁶ In contrast to the liberal authors of the *Report*, Haywood viewed the plantation-based land and labor relations of the rural South as the cornerstone of both racial conflict and, critically, the region’s economic underdevelopment. The heart of the “Negro Question,” Haywood argued, was:

the problem of a depressed peasantry living under a system of sharecropping, riding-boss supervision, debt slavery, chronic land hunger, and dependency—in short, the plantation system a relic of chattel slavery. It presents the curious anomaly of a virtual serfdom in the very heart of the most highly industrialized country in the world. Slave-whipping barbarism at the center of “enlightened” twentieth-century capitalist culture—that is the core of America’s race problem.⁷

⁴ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York, NY: Livewright, 2014), 168; Nikhil Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (New York, NY: New York University Press), 58-100.

⁵ David L. Carlton and Peter A. Coclanis, “Introduction: The *Report* in Historical Perspective,” in Carlton and Coclanis, eds., *Confronting Southern Poverty in the Great Depression: The Report on Economic Conditions of the South with Related Documents*, (New York: Bedford Books, 1996), 10-21; Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sun Belt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 168.

⁶ Harry Haywood, *Negro Liberation* (New York: International Publishers, 1948), 11.

⁷ Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, 11. Haywood’s diagnosis was heavily indebted to the theoretical innovations

Directly quoting from, while subtly reframing the 1938 *Report*, Haywood argued that “The Black Belt” represented “the matrix of the nation’s number one economic problem—the cradle of southern economic and cultural lag.”⁸ Like SPC liberals, Haywood saw economic and racial inequality in temporal terms; the South’s economic development was, from both perspectives, behind that of the rest of the nation. When taken together, the *Report on Economic Conditions in the South and Negro Liberation* reveal contrasting theorizations of development that proceeded first and foremost from divergent spatial imaginaries: that of the “colonized South” and the ever-exploited “Black Belt.” The reformist liberal center embodied by the SPC saw state-directed economic modernization as a tool capable of breaking the South’s colonial status *vis a vis* the industrial North—in sum, development was imagined as a tool to effectively end regional distinctiveness by dismantling the longstanding equivalence between the South, “backward” economic practices and pervasive poverty. As arch developmentalists, SPC liberals subscribed to the common belief, as Barbara Weinstein has put it, that “spatially organized inequalities would be addressed, corrected, and eventually erased through proper modes of government and technical intervention.”⁹ And though it was frequently left unsaid, many such liberals were optimistic that economic development might contribute, in time, to the end of parochial investments in the South’s racial caste

of the communist left, both within and beyond the borders of the United States. Since the late 1920s, a more racially-attentive strand of leftist deliberation had conceptualized African Americans in the rural South as an oppressed nation deserving of a unique place within the class struggle. Indeed, Heywood had been a major proponent of this position, pushing the American Communist Party (CPUSA) to extend both its organizing and revolutionary theory beyond the urban-industrial centers of the global North. See Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Oxford, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 68-93, 112-128.

⁸ Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, 12.

⁹ Barbara Weinstein, “Developing Inequality,” *American Historical Review* 113:1 (2008), 3.

system.¹⁰

Conversely, black intellectuals and civil rights advocates frequently observed a quite different relationship between space, region, race and economic development. Indeed, Haywood's emphasis on southern "underdevelopment" represented an attempt to give the longstanding entanglements of race and rural capitalism causal significance in debates about the South's economic trajectory. Moreover, *Negro Liberation* elaborated a developmental theory—that of the "Black Belt"—that attempted to illuminate the ways in which economic relations produced space, and through space, made race and racial inequalities. In contrast to the simultaneously diffuse and monolithic regionalism of leading southern liberals, Haywood defined the South in terms of its black population and the political economy of the plantation that still anchored those demographic realities. For Haywood, it was critical to focus on the largely cotton-growing heart of the South, a "historically ... continuous area of Negro majority" that, as he put it:

shapes a crescent through twelve southern states. Heading down from its eastern point in Virginia's tidewater section, it cuts a strip through North Carolina, embraces nearly all of South Carolina, cuts into Florida, passes through lower and central Georgia and Alabama, engulfs Mississippi and the Louisiana Delta, wedges into eastern Texas and Southwest Tennessee, and has its western anchor in southern Arkansas.¹¹

In doing so, Haywood highlighted what it had been politically inexpedient for New Deal liberals to admit: that economic reforms that would enrich people, and not just place, had to reckon with the economic and political prerogatives of the most reactionary elements of the region and the ideological edifice—white supremacy—that sustained the authority

¹⁰ On liberals and the struggle for civil rights in the South during the 1930s and 1940s more generally, see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

¹¹ Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, 12.

and power of the southern economic elites.¹²

Spanning the farm crisis of the 1920s to the urban crisis of the 1960s, this chapter surveys the contours of black life in the rural South, as well as changes in the organization of the region's still-largely agricultural economy. It also traces a series of debates in the black public sphere about the possibility that economic development might reform, if not wholly transform, the political economy of the rural South. First and foremost, this chapter offers a brief survey of the world federal development policies made in the rural South, paying close attention to the agricultural revolution's impact on African American life. Subsequently, it probes how those changes would shape post-1960 reform efforts to carve out place for black people in the region's agricultural economy and create more equitable—and spatially even—patterns of economic development.

Secondly, this chapter outlines—in brief—an intellectual and political pre-history of African Americans' engagement with the economics of the rural South and the tradition it birthed: black developmentalism. This was a political project, however, that was not entirely distinct from the liberal center. Indeed, black thinkers' engagement with the question of development necessarily brought them into the intellectual orbit of mid-century white liberals such as Gunnar Myrdal, whose work on the "Negro Question" had been most forcefully expressed in the encyclopedic *An American Dilemma* (1944). Indeed, Myrdal owed much to many of the critical figures of the golden age of black sociology, who had cut their intellectual teeth on the "problem" of the rural South, its economic organization and the assimilation of "traditional" people to modern, capitalist

¹² Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 206-221.

society.¹³ Taking African Americans as an example in *Rich Lands and Poor: The Road to World Prosperity* (1956), Myrdal argued—as many of his contemporaries did—that black Americans’ longstanding segregation from the mainstream of American society had created a distinct culture that displayed striking similarities to the postcolonial world. As Myrdal put it:

Behind the color line the Negro people live a life almost as separate as if they were on an island with restricted communications with the mainland. They have developed an entire class structure of their own ... [with a] unity of interests and aspirations ... just as great as that existing in any underdeveloped country or region.¹⁴

But in line with a new generation of scholarship that coalesced around the paradigm of “modernization,” Myrdal saw “black culture” in optimistic terms; ultimately, as an eminently solvable “development problem.”¹⁵ Indeed, it is easy to see why postwar development theory’s major epistemological and policy intervention—that no forms of racial, cultural or economic divergence was permanent—held so much attraction to African American reformers, even in the context of Jim Crow segregation.

Given the lack of agreement over the precise nature of the region’s colonial status, the appropriate subject of economic policy intervention or the spatial parameters that best explained economic underdevelopment in the South, rural black developmentalism necessarily evolved in an uneasy relationship to the evolving liberal policy agenda. In the early days of the New Deal, for instance, the establishment of the Tennessee Valley

¹³ Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 74-98.

¹⁴ Gunnar Myrdal, *Rich Lands and Poor: The Road to World Prosperity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 14.

¹⁵ Myrdal, *Rich Lands and Poor*, 14.

Authority (TVA) alerted critics such as NAACP lawyer John P. Davis to the possibility that economic modernization threatened, paradoxically, to preserve the South's racial disparities. In large part, the proceeding thirty years had made it clear that those early fears were well founded. Southern poverty remained disproportionately concentrated in the Black Belt, while the rise of the Sunbelt and suburban prosperity in other areas of the South only deepened interregional disparities. In the language of growth-oriented liberalism, the economic organization of the Black Belt South presented a series of "structural impediments," including massive regional outmigration, rural poverty, low levels of state investment in black education, and the ossification of a capital intensive, and state sponsored, model of southern agriculture.

Though clearly a movement that strove first and foremost for legal equality for African Americans and the end of de jure segregation, the Civil Rights Movement should also be read as another stage of in the evolution of black developmentalism, an observation that makes it easier to apprehend the emergence of "development" as a vibrant and prevailing political issue in the Black Power era. Key figures in the movement, for instance, had read and were heavily influenced by the English economist Robert Theobald's *The Rich and the Poor: A Study of the Economics of Rising Expectations* (1959). Likewise, SNCC organizer Bob Moses understood his activism in the mid-1960s as heretical not only to white southerners' investment in racial hierarchy, but also to the unequal trajectory of American economic modernization. As Moses reflected, he and others in rural Mississippi were "raising fundamental questions ... about how the poor can achieve the Good Life, questions liberalism is incapable of

answering.”¹⁶

Indeed, by the dawn of the Great Society and the urban crisis, advocates of black developmentalism had gone one step further. Faced with intensifying patterns of migration from the South, advocates expanded the scope of their developmental vision to encompass the nation as a whole, arguing that the political economy of the rural South functioned as a “root” of American racial relations and economic inequality. Indeed, such an argument was a latent element of developmental discourse and knowledge itself. Given economic development’s essential promise of accelerating national convergence and the end of regional economic inequalities, it followed, such intellectuals argued, that any politics designed to achieve racial equality had to confront the political economy of the rural South.

THE MAKING AND REMAKING OF THE “BLACK RURAL SOUTH”

It is difficult to overstate the extent of the changes that transformed the rural South between the early 1930s and the 1960s. Agricultural modernization—a process initiated by the New Deal state—overturned a rural labor regime that had existed since Reconstruction and irrevocably loosened black peoples’ ties to the land.¹⁷ Their labor made increasingly redundant by mechanization, African Americans left the rural South in unprecedented numbers, ushering in a second, and more statistically significant “Great Migration.” In contrast to the first wave of migration from the South, which reached a pinnacle of 59,000 people per year during the 1920s, the Second Great Migration saw an

¹⁶ Robert Moses, quoted in John Dittmer, “The Politics of the Mississippi Movement, 1954-1964,” in Charles W. Eagles, ed., *The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 88.

¹⁷ On the creation of the crop lien system, see Gerald David Jaynes, *Branches without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

average outmigration of around 147,000 people per year between 1950 and 1970.¹⁸ The tail end of this process, as the Kerner Commission of 1968 recognized, was the deepening of an urban crisis in the post-industrial North.¹⁹

As a result, the first six decades of the twentieth century were characterized by a revolution in the geographic organization of African American life. In 1900, roughly 90 percent of black people lived in the South, with 83 percent residing in rural areas. This had long been the case; in every recorded census since 1790, a similar proportion of African Americans had been located in the region. Little had changed by 1910: in that year, 89 percent of African Americans still remained in the South, though in the intervening decade the national black population had become somewhat more urban, with only 73 percent remaining in rural areas. Between 1910 and 1930, however, a range of factors—including the boll weevil, racial terror, agricultural depression and new opportunities for industrial jobs in the North—pushed over 1.5 million African Americans out of the region. Between 1930 and 1950, this exodus continued, with a further two million black people departing the South. Thus by 1960, the population of the South had become significantly less black, comprising 20.6 percent of the region, down from 36.8 percent in 1860. Rural African Americans, however, remained a durable, and significant proportion of the national black population. In 1970, over 50 percent of African Americans remained in the South, with 44 percent of those 12.1 million people

¹⁸ James N. Gregory, “The Second Great Migration: An Historical Overview,” in Joe W. Trotter, Jr. and Kenneth L. Kusmer, eds., *African American Urban History: The Dynamics of Race, Class and Gender since World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 21; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *The Social and Economic Status of Negroes in the United States, 1970* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 11.

¹⁹ National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *The Kerner Report: The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1988), 116-18.

living in non-metropolitan areas.²⁰

	1940	1950	1960
United States	100.0	100.0	100.0
Urban	48.0	61.6	72.4
Rural nonfarm	16.7	17.2	19.8
Rural Farm	35.3	21.2	7.8
15 Southern States	76.4	63.1	55.3
Urban	27.8	29.9	31.9
Rural nonfarm	14.1	13.5	16.0
Rural farm	34.5	19.6	7.5

Figure 1.1. Distribution of African American population, 1940-1960.²¹

Though the “Black Belt” was as much a construction of the black political imaginary than as a coherent demographic reality, it is nonetheless important to trace changes in its composition over an extended period of time. Census data, federal studies and privately funded scholarship suggests that in statistical terms, the “heart” of the Black Belt was comprised of a number of largely contiguous counties where African Americans represented over fifty percent of the population and where, for the most part, farming predominated. Taking these black-majority counties as a barometer, it is possible to map the geographic contours of an identifiable, if narrowing “black belt” from the late-19th to the mid-twentieth century. In 1880, around 300 counties comprised this region (largely clustered in the Mississippi Delta, southern Alabama and central Georgia), though this number would decline to 264 in 1910, and to 138 by 1960. By the lowering the metric

²⁰ R. Douglas Hurt, “Introduction,” in Hurt, ed., *African American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 1-4; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *The Social and Economic Status of Negroes in the United States, 1970* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 5-21.

²¹ Table adapted from Daniel O. Price, “The Negro Population of the South,” in President’s National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, *Rural Poverty in the United States* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 1968), 13.

from “majority” to a “significant” black population, however, the dimensions of the non-urban black south grow somewhat. In 1930, almost 50 percent (487) of the 1,104 southern counties were assessed as containing black populations of over 30 percent. Though data is unavailable for later years, in 1910 the total size of black-majority counties represented 147,219 square miles, accounting for 16.8 percent of the total territory encompassing the modern, fifteen-state South.²² That said, the “territory” of the Black Belt was by no means equivalent with unencumbered access to, or ownership of the land itself. As of 1959, in no county did black property holdings exceed 26 percent of all available land, though in twenty counties (concentrated in the Alabama Black Belt and coastal South Carolina) African American farm owners outnumbered white farmers.²³

Despite such figures, the “Black Belt” was nonetheless the crucible of both black-owned land and a sizeable—if ever decreasing—population of black farmers. In 1920, around 920,000 African American farmers tilled southern soil, of whom a quarter owned their own land. By 1950, that number had fallen significantly to 560,000, but with no change in the proportion of full ownership. Yet by the beginning of the 1960s, the number of black farmers had plummeted to 265,000, with full-owners comprising a slightly larger proportion of the overall total at 34 percent. Over the same period of time, the average acreage of black-owned farms grew somewhat, from 45 acres in 1920 to 52 acres in 1960. Comparing these statistics against those for white-owned farms, however, reveals the decided limits of African American farmers’ economic power. In 1935, the average white-owned farm was 131 acres (compared to 44 on average for African

²² U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 125.

²³ Calvin L. Beale, “The Negro in American Agriculture,” in John P. Davis, ed., *The American Negro Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 171-172.

Americans); by 1959, the size of the average white farm had grown considerably to 249 acres, while black-owned farms had increased—if modestly—in size to an average of 52 acres.²⁴ To be sure, black *landowners* were not the only group affected by the trajectory of rural modernization in the twentieth century. By comparison, the decline in the black tenant class was even more dramatic. From an apex of just over 700,000 black tenant farmers in 1920, only 138,000 remained by the end of the 1950s.²⁵ Regional outmigration drew heavily from the ranks of the tenant class, a development that continued a long tradition of African Americans using geographic mobility as a form of protest, while affording white southerners, as Greta de Jong notes, a “convenient solution to the disintegration of the plantation system.”²⁶

On the eve of the New Deal, as had been the case since the nineteenth century, cotton production shaped the political economy of the Black Belt. In the introduction to his 1941 compendium *Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties*, the African American sociologist Charles S. Johnson argued that the commodity’s predominance in such areas of the South underpinned the region’s pervasive social and economic inequities:

In the cotton counties definite characteristics mark off the group from other counties. The historical pattern of the cotton plantation county has been one of large ownership and small operating units; of a small white planter group controlling a large Negro and, in some cases, white tenant group; of educational opportunities rigidly limited by the economic interests and social ideology of the planter group. The proportion of tenancy in a county may be high because the farm operators are Negroes, but just as important is the fact that the number of Negroes in a county is large because the plantation owners find in them more tractable tenants.²⁷

²⁴ Beale, “The Negro in American Agriculture,” 161-204.

²⁵ Beale, “The Negro in American Agriculture,” 180.

²⁶ Greta de Jong, “Staying in Place: Black Migration, the Civil Rights Movement, and the War on Poverty in the Rural South,” *Journal of African American History* 90:4 (2005), 387.

²⁷ Charles S. Johnson, *Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 15.

Johnson and his research team, which included another future authority on black rural life, Lewis W. Jones, found that cotton counties had relatively low levels of individual land proprietorship, higher rates of tenant farming on small units, small rural non-farm populations, and a far more tenuous financial commitment to black education than in areas of the South outside the Black Belt.²⁸

Cotton farming, however, would remain a remarkably durable feature of African American rural life long into the twentieth century. By the time of the 1959 agricultural census, 56 percent of black farms remained cotton-producing operations, a figure that significantly outpaced the twenty-six percent of black farms that grew predominately tobacco.²⁹ Black farmers' continuing reliance on the production of cotton was first and foremost reflective of their lack of participation in, and exclusion from, the broader shifts in southern agriculture that had occurred in the postwar era. By 1959, the South as a whole had more cattle farms than cotton farms. Heeding the advice of Green Revolution proponents, more affluent farmers had shifted their attention to truck farming, the conversion of soil to pasture, the cultivation of hay crops and the raising of cattle and poultry. Yet "for the Negro farmer," as the rural economist Calvin Beale wrote in 1966, it "is almost as though such a change had never occurred."³⁰ In 1959, only a paltry four percent of black farmers had successfully entered livestock farming, while a mere one percent had become poultry farmers. Liberated, by virtue of their race, from a largely deposed King Cotton, a significant percentage of white farmers had successfully adapted

²⁸ Johnson, *Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties*, 17-25.

²⁹ Beale, "The Negro in American Agriculture," 176.

³⁰ Beale, "The Negro in American Agriculture," 178.

to a new economic environment, accruing almost fifty percent of their gross income from livestock.³¹

Largely precluded from participating in more profitable forms of agriculture, African American farming in the Black Belt was in part defined by its lack of productivity. For instance, the USDA argued in the late 1950s that a viable farm would sell at least \$10,000 of produce annually (with at least \$2,500 in profit) for its proprietors to achieve a “decent” standard of living in the rural South.³² By that measurement, black farmers performed poorly. Of the 154,298 non-white commercial farmers working in the rural South in 1959, only 3,380 made over \$10,000. By contrast, more than half (78,826) of non-white farmers made less than \$2,500 per year. Critically, low levels of production were as common among farm owners as among the remains of the tenant class. The small size of black owned farms, the high average age of farmers, the disproportionate levels of unimproved land, poor soil and woodland property, the prevalence of subsistence farming, a lack of capital improvements and a continuing reliance on labor-intensive commodity agriculture all contributed to this state of affairs.³³

Finally, changes in the rural economy also begat changes in the gender organization of black southern life. Rural outmigration was a disproportionately male phenomenon. Between 1950 and 1960, the black farm population declined considerably, but this decrease was more marked among males, whose population declined around 63 percent compared to females, who only declined around 51 percent. Across the entire black rural population—a somewhat more accurate measure given the shifting ways

³¹ Beale, “The Negro in American Agriculture,” 182-83.

³² Beale, “The Negro in American Agriculture,” 179.

³³ Beale, “The Negro in American Agriculture,” 185-85;

“farm” and “nonfarm” work were defined in the period under consideration, this pattern was even more pronounced. Between 1950 and 1960, the number of black women in the rural labor force remained relatively consistent at around 400,000, while male workers declined considerably from around 1,200,000 to 800,000.³⁴

THE NEW DEAL AND THE RURAL SOUTH

Any attempt to explain the revolutionary changes that occurred in southern agriculture between 1933 and 1960 requires addressing the impact of New Deal agricultural policy. In this regard, no federal agency did more to transform the organization of the region’s economy than the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). From its inception, the AAA was led by policymakers more concerned with raising the profitability of the agricultural sector—as they termed it, achieving “economic justice” through “parity prices”—than designing effective programs of social reform or poverty alleviation.³⁵ Thus when viewed from the vantage point of the rural South, growth-oriented liberalism had, to a significant degree, come to define federal economic policy *before* the so-called decline of progressive reform in the late 1930 and early 1940s. In the rural South, a farm crisis had been deepening during the 1920s. Exacerbated by cycles of drought and periodic flooding, commodity prices had tumbled throughout the decade. By 1929, the income of southern farmers was the lowest in the nation, but their plight had not yet reached its nadir. Rocked by dislocations in both the national and global economies between 1929 and 1932, southern agricultural production in the ten

³⁴ Daniel O. Price, “The Negro Population of the South,” in President’s National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, *Rural Poverty in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 22-23.

³⁵ Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 53.

principal cotton states declined from \$2.4 billion to \$929 million. By 1932, cotton prices had plummeted to 4.6 cents per pound, down from a World War I-era peak of over 35 cents per pound, while southern farmers continued to pay exorbitant interest rates, taxes and prices for industrial goods that further eroded their income.³⁶

The plummeting cost of cotton was, in the eyes of AAA officials, primarily a problem of overproduction. Passed into law on 12 May 1933, the Agricultural Adjustment Act permitted the federal government to make direct payments to farmers in exchange for a reduction in their output. In the minds of the AAA's guiding forces, the new program would reduce commodity surpluses and in turn produce higher market prices. With a July 12 deadline set, USDA officials—working principally through local agricultural extension services—sought to convince farmers that reducing their acreages and ploughing over already-planted crops was in their best interests. Lending their assistance, two prominent southerners—Georgia's Cully A. Cobb, an agricultural journalist and the head of the AAA's cotton section, and Oscar Johnston, the supervisor of the largest cotton plantation in the South and director of the USDA's cotton pool—travelled widely across the region. Cobb, Johnston and their surrogates offered between \$7 and \$20 per acre, depending on assessment of the land's historic yield. By the end of 1933, over one million contracts had been signed between the AAA and southern cotton farmers, taking 10,497,000 acres out of production in exchange for over \$116 million in benefit payments.³⁷ Despite widespread reservations the program was seemingly a success. The price of cotton had nearly doubled by the end of the year, as had the total

³⁶ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 15-20; Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2009), 120.

³⁷ Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 131.

sales of the crop.³⁸

As Jess Gilbert has argued, such policies were a reflection of the central assumptions of AAA framers such as Henry Wallace, Howard Tolley and M. L. Wilson, whose shared Midwestern agrarian background shaped a consensus around a vision of agricultural production dominated by propertied farmers. As such, the idiosyncratic and divided agricultural economy of the rural South—containing a large population of tenant farmers who worked on fragmented plantations, and whose economic interests were not necessarily in harmony with southern planters—became a laboratory for the transplantation of land policies devised with a very different political context in mind. Such leading AAA figures were, as Gilbert notes, “politically and ideologically ill-prepared to confront divisive class conflict” in the South.³⁹

Critically, there was one major side-effect of the program of acreage reduction: contracts were signed and agreed upon by landlords, many of whom did not own the rights to the full cotton crop and had not consulted with their tenants. Moreover, the first AAA contract contained only weakly phrased instructions to divide federal payments proportionately to the sharecroppers or tenants that farmed the land due for reduction, and payments were to be distributed through local AAA committees that were dominated by large landowners. Unsurprisingly, AAA committees were largely unwilling to punish those who did not obey the spirit of the law.⁴⁰ For the most part, federal largesse incentivized acreage reduction on land first and foremost farmed by tenants, a move that allowed affluent planters to keep the payments and—still in need of labor for much of the

³⁸ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 17.

³⁹ Jess Gilbert, *Planning Democracy: Agrarian Intellectuals and the Intended New Deal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 85.

⁴⁰ Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 61.

year—hire back former tenants as wage laborers.⁴¹

Despite minor changes in the language of the 1934-1935 cotton contract, tenant evictions became a growing reality across the cotton South. New phraseology stated that landlords had to retain the same number of tenants as the previous year “insofar as possible.” This weak edict, unsurprisingly, did little to halt the growing population of landless wage laborers. Soon enough, political unrest and labor organizing followed.⁴² Early New Deal agricultural policy also contributed greatly to the capitalization of southern farmers positioned to benefit from state policy; beyond evictions, the cotton contracts gave propertied farmers the incentive to reinvest federal funds in technologies of agricultural mechanization. In the long term, federal funds became a way for large, propertied farmers to wean themselves from labor-intensive agricultural production, expand their acreages and invest further in the machinery and pesticides that across the South contributed to the rise of what Jack Kirby calls “neoplantations.”⁴³ Though the transformation was far from complete, as Bruce Schulman writes:

By the end of Franklin Roosevelt’s first term, the New Deal had prepared the South for its agricultural revolution. The AAA reversed longstanding trends toward smaller units and larger number of tenants. The program also weakened the system of fragmented plantations—large holdings divided in small tenant-operated units. In the process, it ordered the vestigial paternalism of the landlord-tenant relationship.⁴⁴

BLACK CRITICS OF AGRICULTURE’S NEW DEAL

Soon enough, numerous observers in the black public sphere identified the racial

⁴¹ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 17-20.

⁴² On the history of rural labor organizing during the Great Depression, see Donald H. Grubbs, *The Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the New Deal* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2000); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

⁴³ Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 72.

⁴⁴ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 20.

limits of the New Deal's agricultural reforms. Leading a growing chorus of criticism was the NAACP, who in 1934 had sent a member of their legal division, John P. Davis, to the South to solicit the testimony of black tenant farmers. Hearing numerous stories of benefit payments being frequently denied or drastically reduced, Davis concluded that the AAA's cotton program was accelerating the displacement of black farmers. Representing the NAACP at a conference convened by USDA officials, Davis recommended that the agency take steps to guarantee benefit payments reached croppers and tenants.

Furthermore, Davis argued that black farmers be guaranteed a larger share of available federal funds.⁴⁵ In an attempt to buttress his research with emotive power, Davis asked a small group of black sharecroppers he had met in Alabama while conducting research to accompany him to Washington. Though undoubtedly a sincere attempt to impress upon federal officials the gravity of the situation unfolding in rural southern communities, Davis' strategy was not one he repeated, particularly once the identity of the farmers made its way back to hostile local officials in Alabama.⁴⁶

Undoubtedly, much of the NAACP criticism during the early years of the New Deal focused on the issue of black exclusion from the administrative ranks—both at the local and all the way to Washington—of the USDA. But this was not, primarily, an example of the Association's middle class politics. Rather, the NAACP argued that question of black representation did much to expose the limitations of liberal economic policy in the rural South. Moreover, it was firmly in line with the Association's ongoing

⁴⁵ Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression: The Problem of Economic Recovery* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1970), 40-41.

⁴⁶ Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression*, 52, f.2.

challenge to peonage cases in the region.⁴⁷ The African American historian and social critic Rayford Logan made this point as clearly as any, noting that in contrast to other federal agencies the Department of Agriculture—and more specifically, the AAA—was administered almost completely by whites. “Hence the poor Negro tenants and sharecroppers,” Logan argued, “had no one to argue their side of the case.”⁴⁸ Thus the issue of black representation framed a growing attention in the black public sphere to the ways federal economic development policy was imperiling the livelihoods of rural African Americans. And it was pointless, critics argued, to try and disentangle economics from race. When given the occasion, the African American farm journalist Charles S. Brown informed USDA Secretary Henry Wallace that “the American scheme of things promotes dual problems for the Negro farmer—those of agriculture and those of race.” As Brown put it bluntly, “too much attention is given to placating reactionary forces, who are wealthy and vocal.”⁴⁹

Another critical test case for the egalitarian pretensions of the New Deal quickly materialized in the planning and administration of the most far-reaching and ambitious project of the modernizing state: the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Beginning in 1933, the TVA reshaped the physical landscape of the upper South, clearing over 175,000 acres of land, putting down 12,000 miles of roads and, perhaps most notably of all, excavating roughly thirty million cubic yards of soil.⁵⁰ Encompassing damming, rural electrification, education projects and broad efforts at social reform, the TVA was a

⁴⁷ Risa Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 51-80.

⁴⁸ Rayford Logan, “Negro Status Under the New Deal,” *Sphinx* (May, 1935), 22.

⁴⁹ Charles S. Brown, quoted in Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression*, 42.

⁵⁰ Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 40.

pioneering experiment in rural modernization that would become critical for development work in both the American and global Souths.⁵¹ A state-driven technology of economic growth and greater national cohesion, the TVA represented a commitment to centralized planning that could, its proponents believed, guarantee the more effective functioning of markets while enhancing consumer power and providing security to previously marginalized communities.⁵²

In extending the federal government's social engineering and economic development efforts to the South, however, black spokespeople were given an opening to raise the issue of Jim Crow segregation and question the commitment of the New Deal state to the cause of racial justice and civil rights. As *Opportunity*, the journal of the National Urban League put it, "Promises, nebulous and indefinite are being made [to] Negro groups that ... cooperative communities are to be established in which their rights will be taken care of."⁵³ Equally critical was the question of black workers' involvement in the construction of TVA dams. Firstly, it so happened that the Tennessee Valley was a predominately white sub-region of the South, where fewer African Americans stood to directly benefit from high modernist planning. Indeed, John Davis and his fellow NAACP lawyer Charles Hamilton Houston remained skeptical of the Authority's commitment to black progress, arguing in the pages of the *Crisis* that TVA functionaries were "bending over backwards not to give any offense to the traditions of the South."⁵⁴ Davis and Houston's ire was ostensibly directed toward the Authority's decision to

⁵¹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 270.

⁵² Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 93.

⁵³ Cranston Clayton, "The TVA and the Race Problem," *Opportunity* (April, 1934), 112.

⁵⁴ John P. Davis and Charles Hamilton Houston, "TVA: Lily-White Reconstruction," *The Crisis* (October, 1934), 291.

renege on promises to hire black workers in direct proportion to their percentage of the local population, which in the TVA region hovered at around ten percent. Further confirming NAACP fears was the TVA-created town of Norris, Tennessee. Designed as an “ideal” community, Authority planners chose to preserve southern segregation and barred black families from occupying newly constructed houses in the town. Davis and Houston were thus forced to conclude that even in the eyes of a modernizing state, “Negroes do not belong in the ‘ideal American community.’”⁵⁵ But the criticism ran deeper than that. The South could not achieve “development,” the NAACP’s legal minds argued, as long as New Deal programs upheld the prerogatives of powerful local whites. As they put it:

The program cannot be successful without the integration of the large Negro segment ... Certainly no program to ‘displace haphazard, unplanned and unintegrated social and industrial development’ in the region can proceed without inclusion of the Negro. For it is the Negro who has been most exposed to the anti-social practices and economic exploitation which have retarded the development of the region.⁵⁶

Black advancement was thus inextricably tied to southern advancement; the region could not “keep its prejudice and have its prosperity too,” Davis and Houston argued.⁵⁷

BACK TO THE FARM POLITICS DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Civil rights-oriented critics of the New Deal state’s role in preserving Jim Crow and intensifying the unequal balance of economic power were addressing, at the level of federal policy, the question of African Americans’ place, and future, in the rural South. But in doing so, their efforts dovetailed with an ongoing tradition of rural-centric thought

⁵⁵ Davis and Houston, “Lily-White Reconstruction,” 290.

⁵⁶ Davis and Houston, “Lily-White Reconstruction,” 290.

⁵⁷ Davis and Houston, “Lily-White Reconstruction,” 311.

in African American public life which dated to at least the late-nineteenth century. Between 1920 and 1935, however, this discourse had been infused with new vitality as agricultural depression, economic reforms and rural displacement in the South forced a reckoning which explicitly addressed questions of political economy, the relationship between racial identity and region, as well as the future of black integration into American life. For a group that became known as “Back to the Farm” advocates, a number of central questions were operative. To what extent could farming and agricultural modernization allow for the enhancement of African American life? What would the consequences and costs be of declining black farm tenancy? To what extent would state policies accelerate black urbanization, and to what extent was this outcome desirable?⁵⁸

Anxieties about the urbanization of black life were the product of Progressive-era debates about the challenge of social welfare provision. Between 1900 and 1930, the irrepressible forces of modernity—particularly mass communication and long-range transportation—had done much to erode the isolation of rural communities, while the growth of industrial work in the North diminished the longstanding equivalence between black life and rurality.⁵⁹ In the wake of these transformations, the emergence of an intellectual framework of social disorganization theory framed black urbanization primarily in negative terms, focusing on the destruction of rural communal norms and institutions in the aftermath of migration.⁶⁰ In 1923, for instance, Monroe Work—a

⁵⁸ Precious little scholarship has been devoted to the “Back to the Farm” movement in part, I suspect, because of its perceived conservatism.

⁵⁹ On the Great Migration, see James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13-65.

⁶⁰ On social disorganization theory, see Toure F. Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity: The Urban League and the Politics of Racial Uplift, 1910-1950* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 22-23.

sociologist and Director of Research and Records at Tuskegee Institute—argued that the “problem” of black deprivation in rural and urban areas were not discrete, but intertwined processes. “What affects the Negro in the rural districts,” Work argued, “re-acts on those dwelling in cities; what affects those dwelling in cities likewise reacts upon those dwelling in the country districts.”⁶¹ But if the essence of Booker T. Washington’s spatial accommodation—most clearly articulated in his exhortation for African Americans to cast down their bucket in the South—seemed an increasingly bizarre position to take amidst a deepening farm crisis, a revived emphasis on addressing the conditions that hastened migration from the South began to gain credibility among a significant swathe of black intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s.

In a series of editorials for the Norfolk *Journal and Guide*, the Howard University sociologist Kelly Miller raised his concerns about a racial future bound ever more closely to the vicissitudes of urban life. A “true pragmatist” in the estimation of Jonathan Scott Holloway, Miller was concerned first and foremost with prosaic approaches to the alleviation of black poverty. In the early 1930s, the issue seemed newly vital. The farm crisis of the 1920s had provoked a widespread exodus of African Americans from the rural South, where many arrived to face segregated urban labor markets. By the early 1930s, cities were roiling from the effects of Crash of 1929 and a subsequent economic depression, with black residential areas becoming ever more crowded, while relief lines swelled.⁶² As Miller argued in “Back to the Farm,” it would be wise “to turn serious

⁶¹ Monroe Work, “Research With Respect to Cooperative Between Urban and Rural Communities,” *Opportunity* 1 (February, 1923), 7.

⁶² Raymond Gavins, *The Perils and Prospects of Southern Black Leadership: Gordon Blain Hancock, 1884-1970* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 63-67; see also Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 29-88.

attention towards the race to development of [a] rural foundation which alone seems destined to assure him an important and permanent place in our industrial and economic scheme.”⁶³ Yet he was not alone in sounding the alarm. Confronting the precarious reality experienced by many urban workers, other black public figures called for a reappraisal of the economic potential of rural life, including Benjamin F. Hubert, the President of Georgia State Industrial College, Gordon Blaine Hancock, a Professor of economics and sociology at Virginia Union University, and P.B. Young, the editor of the *Journal and Guide*. For this small, yet prominent cohort, the city seemed no more a promised land than the rural South.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the “Back to the Farm movement” simply reflected the continuation of a tradition of rural black conservatism most famously advanced by Booker T. Washington. In a 1932 editorial, the Norfolk *Journal and Guide* argued that the repopulating of the rural South had to encompass land reform and alterations to the economic structure of rural areas. “There must be some sort of plan,” the editors suggested, “formulated by the government and backed by the government under which people may take up life on the soil as a means of making a living and of rehabilitating the source of our national wealth.”⁶⁴ Going further than most, Dr. James Hardy Dillard—a member of the newly-created Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life—argued that absentee landlords should have their idle lands taxed at a prohibitively high rate, thus compelling them to sell to small proprietors.⁶⁵ And like the

⁶³ Miller, “Back to the Farm,” 18.

⁶⁴ “For Improved Rural Life,” Norfolk *Journal and Guide* (24 December 1932), in *The Future of Negroes on the Farm: Articles and Editorials Reprinted from the Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, VA: Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life, n.d.), 27.

⁶⁵ James Hardy Dillard, quoted in “For Improved Rural Life,” *Future of Negroes on the Farm*, 27.

editors of the *Journal and Guide*, Dillard saw the state as the crucial mechanism for enacting meaningful land reform that would expand access to proprietorship for rural African Americans and serve as an economic alternative wage labor in the cities.⁶⁶

What is also notable about the claims of “Back to the Farm” advocates was their tendency to frame the issue of black economic integration in developmental terms. Advocates often began from a fundamentally temporal (and deeply pessimistic) assumption about African Americans’ relationship to the larger American economy and technological change that they concluded would ultimately preempt black advancement. As Miller argued, the advent of a solely industrial economy would inevitably consign African Americans to menial positions. “The Negro is the victim of the machine,” Miller argued. “He has little or no function where machinery prevails ... The white man and his machine seem calculated to eliminate the Negro or to flatten him out at the bottom.”⁶⁷ Prefiguring later interest in deploying southern farmland to developmental ends, Miller’s critique was first and foremost a recognition of the lack of capital available to African Americans in the urban North. With no control over the means of production, Miller argued, black proletarians would inevitably be cast asunder on the hostile shores of industrial capitalism. As he put it, “The saddest words in our history since Emancipation is that “the race is losing ground.”⁶⁸

It might be tempting to see Back to the Farm advocates as the black public sphere’s counterpart to the Nashville Agrarians, whose 1930 text *I’ll Take My Stand* staked out a defense of southern life as a sanctuary of tradition in a quickly modernizing,

⁶⁶ Dillard, quoted in “For Improved Rural Life,” *Future of Negroes on the Farm*, 27.

⁶⁷ Kelly Miller, “Is the City Negro Doomed?,” *Future of Negroes on the Farm*, 15-16.

⁶⁸ Kelly Miller, “Kelly Miller Views Farm Life,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide* (7 January 1933), in *Future of Negroes on the Farm*, 21.

and industrializing world. As the “Twelve Southerners” who contributed to the volume put it in their introduction, “The theory of agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers.”⁶⁹ It would be somewhat inaccurate, however, to link the two political formations by virtue of a shared recourse to the rhetoric—and moral register—of “agrarianism” amidst a period of economic tumult. In direct contrast to an emerging developmental discourse in black public life, the Nashville Agrarians were fiercely anti-statist, skeptical of social scientific pretensions to explain and critique southern race relations, and vigorous defenders of southern history and culture. Indeed, the Twelve Southerners’ writings in the 1930s reveal the musings of a cohort deeply fearful of the ways New Deal liberalism threatened to overhaul the South’s agricultural economy and, by extension, a racial order founded on white supremacy.⁷⁰ By contrast, *Back to the Farm* advocates maintained, despite subsequent accusations of regressive conservatism, that southern agriculture had to be reformed insofar as doing so would benefit African Americans. By contrast, the Agrarians staked out a critique of the New Deal state and a range of development policies that, in fact, preserved southern tradition and, as one sympathetic scholar has noted, offered to emancipate (white) southerners from the economic heel of the industrial North.⁷¹

BLACK SOCIAL SCIENCE AND THE RURAL SOUTH

⁶⁹ The Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1978), xlvii.

⁷⁰ For a historiographical overview of the “Twelve Southerners” intellectual contributions and an assessment of the movements’ relationship to the New Deal, see Emily S. Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood, “Introduction,” in Bingham and Underwood, *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal: Essays after I’ll Take My Stand* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 1-34.

⁷¹ M. E. Bradford, “The Agrarian Tradition: An Affirmation,” in Bradford, *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 87.

For agrarian intellectuals, the New Deal's developmental aspirations were a threat to the traditions and order that defined the South. For the sociologist and African American liberal Charles S. Johnson, however, liberal economic reforms represented a fundamental threat to black rural life. Educated at Virginia Union, before enrolling in graduate study in Sociology at the University of Chicago in 1916, Johnson's life and scholarship were profoundly shaped by the mentorship of Robert Park and his work in the emergent field of "race relations." Proceeding from a stagist theorization of society, Park saw racial conflict as a temporary, if necessary prelude to cultural assimilation and the adoption of a common, American value system. As such, black migration from the South and the growth of industrial employment would prove, over time, to be key social preconditions for the reduction of prejudice.⁷² The Chicago Race riots of 1919, however, gave Johnson cause to ponder the inevitability of the general theory sketched out by Park. In response to those upheavals, Johnson produced his first major study for the Chicago Race Relations Commission, arguing that the riots—rather than an unfortunate, but inevitable consequence of progress—were in fact a product of competition over jobs and housing, unequal legal protections and intensifying racial animosities.⁷³ Convinced that the race problem could not be resolved without significant public intervention, Johnson spent almost a decade working for the National Urban League, before in 1928 accepting a position heading the department of social science at Fisk University in Nashville.⁷⁴

In 1934, Johnson published *Shadow of the Plantation*, a work that firmly

⁷² For an overview of Park and the paradigm of "race relations," see O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 78-84.

⁷³ For Johnson's study (of which he was one of two principal authors), see Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1922).

⁷⁴ Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 78-79; Marybeth Gasman, "Charles Spurgeon Johnson," in *African American National Biography*, Vol. 4., eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, 560-61.

established its author as a pre-eminent authority on black rural culture and set the terms of much of the discursive and intellectual terrain for future reform efforts in the agricultural South. As much as anything, *The Shadow of the Plantation* was an act of profound cultural and intellectual revision. Through fieldwork based on interviews with over six hundred families in Macon County, Georgia, Johnson thoroughly demolished the pervasive myth of a contented black rural life that continued to exist, largely undisturbed, amid the protective confines of plantation environs deeply shaped by the legacy of slavery.



Figure 1.2. Charles S. Johnson.⁷⁵

Life in the shadows, as Johnson revealed, was defined by the indignities of an enormously exploitative crop lien system wherein “the advantage is always with the white landlord ... [who] dictates the terms and keeps the books.” “The demands of the

⁷⁵ http://amhistory.si.edu/archives/scurlock/about_the_scurlocks/notables/JohnsonCharles.htm, accessed 22 February 2016.

system,” Johnson wrote, “determine the social and economic relations, the weight of which falls heaviest on those lowest down.”⁷⁶ Johnson’s work centered the human consequences—what he called the “fatal heritage” of the plantation economy, including low education levels, family instability and widespread poverty, and explained them as first and foremost a product of human will and power conflicts rather than as evidence of essential racial inferiority. Wedded to the paradigm of modernization, *Shadow of the Plantation* nonetheless tended to describe black rural culture as “traditional” and “backward” in a number of ways. As Johnson argued in the work’s conclusion, black rural life was largely analogous to other peasant cultures, a social world defined by its “isolation and cultural lag.” Johnson, however, was careful to point out that any attempts to define the “problem” of the black South had to be counterbalanced by an acknowledgment of the rich communal life, resourcefulness and durability that suffused rural communities.⁷⁷

By the mid-1930s, Johnson had established himself as a prominent black liberal, with extensive ties to white philanthropic organizations and the federal government, both of which had done much to enhance the capabilities and resources of his department at Fisk. Despite these connections, Johnson’s public commentary frequently pivoted between displaying his liberal *bona fides* and levying trenchant critiques of New Deal reforms. Writing in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1935, Johnson noted that despite the “mild and ineffectual caution” of the cotton contracts’ wording, the net result of AAA reforms had been to effect a “striking and often indefensible inequality in the

⁷⁶ Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 128.

⁷⁷ Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*, 212; Richard Robbins, *Sideline Activist: Charles S. Johnson and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1996), 86-97.

distribution of the benefits of the subsidy.”⁷⁸ Indeed, the Rosenwald Fund provided resources for Johnson’s most searing critique of the New Deal: *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* (1935). Published with the legitimizing imprimatur of two prominent white liberals, Will W. Alexander and Edwin R. Embree, the work called for government sponsored land reform as a means to allow poor and marginalized communities to enter the mainstream of American capitalism.⁷⁹

In addition, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* showcased Johnson’s ability to think broadly, and creatively, about potential models of rural reorganization. As much as anything, Johnson recognized that efforts to deal with the “problem” of the rural South necessitated state interventions into the political economy that maintained black disadvantage and buttressed white control of agricultural production. Indeed, he had concluded *Shadow of the Plantation* arguing for “the need of a complete reorganization of agriculture” and a “comprehensive planning, which affects not merely the South but the nation.”⁸⁰ In his 1935 *Journal of American Sociology* article “Incidence Upon the Negroes,” Johnson predicted that “the continued accentuation of the inherent evils of the tenant system ... will eventually compel the enactment of comprehensive and drastic legislation to correct it, as a means of saving southern agriculture itself.”⁸¹ Johnson advanced these points even more forcefully in his later work *Growing Up in the Black Belt*. Though primarily a study of childhood psychological development that was in its own way an important intellectual contribution, *Growing Up in the Black Belt* (1941) was

⁷⁸ Charles S. Johnson, “Incidence Upon the Negroes,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 40:6 (1935), 739.

⁷⁹ Patrick J. Gilpin and Marybeth Gasman, *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 110.

⁸⁰ Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*, 212.

⁸¹ Johnson, “Incidence Upon the Negroes,” 745.

also notable for the way it centered economic development—in essence, the necessary breakdown of the plantation—as a key precondition of racial assimilation. As Johnson argued:

Negro families in the nonplantation areas, in spite of the fact that they live on poorer land, show greater diversity in types, have higher farm ownership rates, a somewhat higher standard of living, a higher educational level, and a larger measure of family organization in terms of the dominant cultural patterns.⁸²

Continuing, Johnson observed that “it is characteristic of the areas of mixed agriculture that there is wider occupational differentiation, increased currency and trade, more subsistence farming, a greater mobility.”⁸³

A MODEL OF RURAL REFORM?

By incentivizing the reduction of tenant farming, New Deal policymakers had prodded the South down a path that led away, they hoped, from feudal economic organization toward modern agricultural enterprise. That said, the extent to which these reforms would nurture economic development in impoverished communities was initially unclear. As such, the evident dislocations wrought by production controls quickly became the subject of intense debate and, eventually, outright rebellion in the ranks of the USDA. A group of liberal-leaning lawyers in the AAA’s legal division had become increasingly sympathetic to the claims of displaced farmers, particularly when the organizing of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in Arkansas and Mississippi in 1934 and 1935 forced the issue further still.⁸⁴ The lawyers’ acknowledgement of the vexed class and racial politics of rural reform came to a head when their tentative support for

⁸² Charles C. Johnson, *Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1941), 49.

⁸³ Johnson, *Growing Up in the Black Belt*, 49-50.

⁸⁴ Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2000).

interracial unionism—manifest in an attempt to reinterpret a crucial section of the cotton contract in favor of sharecroppers’ tenancy rights—was brought to the attention of Henry Wallace by AAA administrator Chester C. Davis. Faced with the choice of supporting legal division liberals and the southern tenant class, or AAA production controls and the powerful southern planters who supported them, Wallace acquiesced to Davis’ principal demand: the resignation of the liberals.⁸⁵

The purge of 1935, however, presaged a momentary shift in the emphasis of federal rural development programs. Though production controls and subsidies remained the central policy tool of the New Deal state, the establishment of the Resettlement Administration (RA) in 1935 signified a growing commitment to address rural poverty and welfare. Assuming leadership of the Administration was Rexford Tugwell, an Ivy League-educated liberal and USDA Undersecretary who believed first and foremost that land use was the foundational factor in maintaining rural poverty and, more broadly, underpinned the majority of the problems facing American agriculture. Critically, Tugwell departed in important ways from the “agrarian” Midwesterners in the AAA, arguing that family farms and individual proprietorship were not the sole solution to rural deprivation. Rather, Tugwell advocated for the creation of cooperatives and farming collectives that could be economically competitive with larger agricultural enterprises. In 1937, Congress passed the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, and the RA became redesigned as the Farm Security Administration which, although significantly less radical than its predecessor, evolved into a major federal agency. As Jess Gilbert notes, the FSA

⁸⁵ Gilbert, *Planning Democracy*, 85-87; Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 79-83; for a thorough accounting of the purge, see Lawrence J. Nelson, “The Art of the Possible: Another Look at the ‘Purge Liberals in 1935,’” *Agricultural History* 57:4 (1983), 416-435.

“became one of the largest, most radical, and least racist of federal entities ... a ‘poor man’s Department of Agriculture’ ... [that functioned] as an educational, research, and action agency for small farmers, tenants, sharecroppers and farm laborers.”⁸⁶

A bible of rural modernization, the 1940 publication of *Farmers in a Changing World* encapsulated the USDA’s increasing commitment to democratic, grassroots development and planning. Across over twelve hundred pages, contributors summarized and expounded upon a range of USDA initiatives that sought, as Henry Wallace put it in the yearbook’s introduction, to “build an economic democracy that will match our political democracy.”⁸⁷

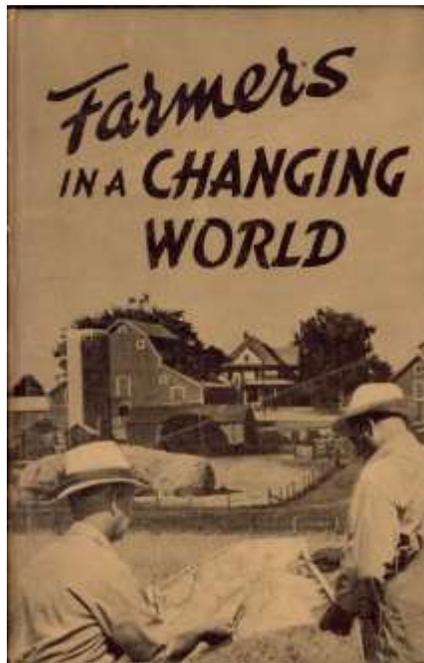


Figure 1.3. *Farmers in a Changing World* cover, 1940.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Gilbert, *Planning Democracy*, 88-89.

⁸⁷ Henry A. Wallace, quoted in United States Department of Agriculture, *Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), 12.

⁸⁸ USDA, *Farmers in a Changing World*.

Paradoxically, USDA policies—while initially doing much to erode the material basis of black communal life in the South—had changed course with remarkable speed, emphasizing “community” and participatory planning. As *Farmers in a Changing World* indicated, effective federal agricultural policy now had to encompass a heightened emphasis on rural education, scientific management of farming, decentralization, applied cultural anthropology, and cooperative land use planning. Together, these new intellectual and policy initiatives were to be the central pillars through which the USDA would attempt to address poverty in the countryside. In turn, they established a conceptual language—“community development”—that, would become central to rural reformers’ efforts in the 1960s. *Farmers in a Changing World* represented a clear articulation of the effort to achieve what Daniel Immerwahr has called “communitarian statecraft,” a mode of political engagement that eschewed normative, linear models of rural development to be imposed from above by experts not versed in the folkways of rural life. Instead, scholars and technocrats located in the USDA’s Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) encouraged rural leaders to diagnose solutions to problems.⁸⁹ Collectively, these programs served nearly two hundred thousand farm people in 2,200 counties across the nation.⁹⁰

Not to be left out, the towering intellectuals Charles Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois and the African American economist Abram Harris lent their assistance to these efforts, lecturing at USDA schools of philosophy in the rural South.⁹¹ Du Bois’ contributions, in particular, coincided with an evolution in his theorization of American capitalism. As he

⁸⁹ Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*, 44-47; Gilbert, *Planning Democracy*, 179-211.

⁹⁰ Gilbert, *Planning Democracy*, 212.

⁹¹ Andrew Jewett, “The Social Sciences, Philosophy, and the Cultural Turn in the 1930s USDA,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 49:4 (2013), 410.

noted in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), still-unreconstructed racism in the American labor movement—when combined with the transformations wrought by New Deal economic policy—provided clear evidence that African Americans had to seek out new ways “to fit himself into the new economic organization which the world faces.”⁹² Often dismissed as a watered-down paean to civil rights leadership, *Dusk of Dawn* reveals Du Bois’ ongoing wrestling with Depression-era political economy, particularly in his focus on the future of black labor, American capitalism and the legacy of Booker T. Washington. Notably, Du Bois equated Washingtonian politics with “development.” As he noted in the introduction, “Had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me, I should have probably been an unquestioning worshiper at the shrine of social order and economic development into which I was born.”⁹³ The paradox of *Dusk of Dawn*, however, was the extent to which it revealed how two supposed ideological foes were themselves encased in the language and practice of “development” itself.

In *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois proposed that African Americans’ best responses to their economic plight had to be rooted in cooperative consumer movements. “In the future reorganization of industry,” Du Bois wrote, “the consumer as against the producer is going to become the key man.”⁹⁴ Consumer activism, however, would soon translate into new forms of black economic organization:

Appropriate direction and easily obtainable technique and capital would enable Negroes further to take over the whole of their retail distribution, to raise, cut, mine and manufacture a considerable proportion of the basic raw material, to man their own manufacturing plants, to process foods, to import necessary raw materials, to invent and build machines ... All this would be a realization of democracy in industry led by consumers’ organizations and extending to planned

⁹² W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1940; repr. 2007), 100.

⁹³ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 14.

⁹⁴ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 105.

production. Is there any reason to believe that such a democracy among American Negroes could evolve the necessary leadership in technique and the necessary social institutions which would so guide and organize the masses that a new economic foundation could be laid for a group which is today threatened with poverty and social subordination?⁹⁵

Although he anticipated that the future of American capitalism would revolve around urban consumers rather than rural producers, Du Bois' work laid much of the intellectual foundation for later black development efforts. Emphasizing the necessity of nurturing black capital ownership and manufacturing while nationalizing African American consumer practices, *Dusk of Dawn* fused a black economic populism with a vision of democratic capitalism. Rather than “dodge the whole problem of color in economic change,” Du Bois argued, African Americans' principal goal had to be developing the institutions, techniques and resources necessary to define a black economic modernity in progressive terms. Indeed, it was Du Bois' emphasis on the necessity of considered race leadership—the issue that led later scholars to marginalize the work—that reveals the deepening imbrication of “race politics” and technocratic developmentalism in black political culture. The key, Du Bois argued, was to reconcile the needs of the masses with the expertise of the developmentalists, between those with “expert knowledge in the technique of production and distribution and of scholarship in the past and present of economic development.”⁹⁶ Here, in embryo, was far more than a celebration of the enlightened race leadership or a capitulation to dark currents of racial separatism. In *Dusk of Dawn* Du Bois had presented a developmental vision that looked beyond, yet was still embedded in, American capitalist modernity.

⁹⁵ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 106.

⁹⁶ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 107.

Yet such visions of a *détente* between economic modernization and grassroots capitalism had only a brief moment in the sun, particularly in the rural South. There, no institution did more to undermine this vision of democratic, communitarian agricultural planning than the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF). Though a longstanding supporter of AAA policies, the AFBF became convinced that the USDA's increasing commitment to grassroots agrarianism and rural welfare threatened to undermine its ability to shape American agricultural policy. Between 1940 and 1942, the Farm Bureau launched a series of attacks on the sources of progressive agricultural policy in the USDA. First, the AFBF lobbied Congress to cut funding to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, while simultaneously convincing the recently installed Secretary of Agriculture, Claude Wickard, to vest new power and authority in local AAA boards at the expense of the now-extensive network of local BAE planners. Drawing legitimacy and strength from a growing anti-New Deal coalition, the AFBF continued to push for the dismantling of the Farm Security Administration, which in 1946 (and long shorn of reform-minded employees) was reorganized as the Farmers Home Administration, with the intention of providing loans to assist farm tenants to purchase land. All told, the AFBF had in large part succeeded in cementing the concerns of prosperous farmers in agricultural policymaking and silencing, as Jess Gilbert argues, "an agrarian wing of the social democracy that appeared to be then emerging in America."⁹⁷

MID-CENTURY RURAL MODERNIZERS

By the close of World War II, much of the Black Belt looked very different than it had a decade before; as a whole, the rural South had been profoundly reshaped by a

⁹⁷ Gilbert, *Planning Democracy*, 213.

number of what Charles Johnson called “accelerated social changes.”⁹⁸ Firstly, the exigencies of wartime production had created labor demands in urban centers which further diminished the size of the rural black population in the South.⁹⁹ For those who remained in the rural South, however, World War II contributed—and deepened—existing patterns of economic stratification as farmers positioned to benefit from the wartime boom were able to invest in technologies and productive processes that loosened their dependence on black agricultural labor. Moreover, southern farmers’ chronic indebtedness was alleviated by rising prices and good harvests during the war years. Signs of a recovering agricultural sector also encouraged both the provision of federal financial support for farmers, and revived commercial banks’ interest in extending loans. For most farmers, the best investment was clear: the mechanical tractor, which replaced mules’ role in ploughing across the region and, as Gilbert Fite notes, “proved to be a major facilitator of change in southern farming ... permitting the modification of land and cropping patterns.”¹⁰⁰ In concert with a rapidly and growing and resourced research complex, southern farmers shifted their attention to a new set of crops designed to end southern agriculture’s dependence on cotton, a crop that was now more profitably produced elsewhere in the Global South.¹⁰¹

Nonetheless, the influx of black rural migrants to urban areas—and the attendant upswell in racial conflict and white terror during the war years, a phenomena particularly directed at African American servicemen—revived the developmental aspirations of

⁹⁸ Charles S. Johnson, “The Present State of Race Relations in the South,” *Social Forces* 23:1 (Oct., 1944), 27.

⁹⁹ Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 163-179.

¹⁰⁰ Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 185.

¹⁰¹ Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 2014), 379-426.

black southern leadership. Indeed, it was an old “Back to the Farm” advocate—Gordon Hancock—that was critical in initiating a series of summits that would eventually lead to the creation of the Southern Regional Council in 1944, an organization that emphasized research and interracial dialogue as expedient solutions to the race problem.¹⁰² Held on the 20th of October, 1942 in Durham, North Carolina, the Southern Conference on Race Relations brought together almost 60 African American leaders from across the region to discuss potential responses to Jim Crow, black participation in the war effort and a recent increase in the incidences of white vigilante violence. Alongside Hancock, attendees included a variety of scholars, preachers, business leaders and representatives of organized labor. All told, as Raymond Gavins argues, the group could be said to be “middle class moderates who assumed the right to speak for all Southern Negroes—regardless of class.”¹⁰³ Held at the North Carolina College for Negroes, notable attendees included University Presidents such as Horace Mann Bond and Benjamin Mays, scholars such as Hancock, Charles Johnson, Luther Jackson, members of the black business community such as North Carolina Mutual Life President C. C. Spaulding, and assorted members of the Southern Negro Youth Congress.¹⁰⁴

The final statement of the Conference, formally titled “A Basis for Inter-racial Cooperation and Development in the South: A Statement by Southern Negroes”—but

¹⁰² On the formation of the Southern Regional Council, see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 164-166.

¹⁰³ Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 165; Gavins, *Perils and Prospects*, 123-24. For a full accounting of the attendees, see Sub-Committee of the Southern Conference on Race Relations (hereafter SSCRR), “A Basis for Inter-Racial Cooperation and Development in the South,” <https://ia902502.us.archive.org/2/items/southernconferen00sout/southernconferen00sout.pdf>, accessed online 3 June 2015.

¹⁰⁴ On the Southern Negro Youth Conference, see Erik Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 213-254.

colloquially known as the “Durham Manifesto—has proven an understudied document. For Peter Eisenstadt, the Manifesto can be understood as a part of a longer tradition of southern black conservatism whose proponents had, by the end of World War II, “outdistanced southern white liberals on racial matters.”¹⁰⁵ The Durham Manifesto, however, is notable for the ways its proscriptions revealed southern black leaders’ faith in the political expediency—or at least, rhetorical embrace—of technocratic, developmental solutions to the “race problem.” In this regard, proponents of the Durham Manifesto borrowed techniques of reform advanced initially by New Deal state, while attempting to offer a correction to liberal policy makers’ consistent disregard for wide swathes of African American people and their economic livelihoods. In the sphere of agriculture, for instance, the Manifesto’s authors argued that “the South is economically handicapped and that many of its disabilities are rooted in agricultural maladjustments.”¹⁰⁶ In response, leaders called for greater funding for black land grant colleges, the appointment of African Americans to rural policy making positions at both the federal and state level, and increasing levels of relief payments to black farmers. Finally, the document called for legal and policy reforms that could defend black agricultural livelihoods: “the establishment of sufficient safeguards in the system of tenancy to promote the development of land and home ownership and more security on the land.”¹⁰⁷ And as a developmental document, the Durham Manifesto framed its claims in universal terms. Rejecting parochial politics, its authors argued that conference was by no means “isolationist.” In his introductory remarks, Hancock noted his belief that “the Negro

¹⁰⁵ Peter Eisenstadt, “Southern Black Conservatism, 1865-1945: An Introduction,” in Eisenstadt, *Black Conservatism: Essays in Intellectual and Political History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 51-80.

¹⁰⁶ SSCRR, “A Basis,” 10.

¹⁰⁷ SSCRR, “A Basis,” 10.

question of the South is a part of the great question throughout the nation and world.”¹⁰⁸

Despite the upheavals wrought by the Second World War, the realignment of southern agriculture was not yet complete. A momentous event in the history of the Black Belt and the cotton-producing South was a 1947 conference held jointly by the National Cotton Council, the USDA and the Delta Council, a planter controlled economic development organization. Held in Stoneville, Mississippi at the Mississippi Delta Branch experimental station, the conference brought together the key players in what would become the South’s impending Green Revolution: land grant university presidents, representatives of agricultural machinery companies such as International Harvester, leaders of producer organizations and farm bureaus, alongside directors of various experimental stations in the region. Addressing this class of rural power-brokers, USDA official E. D. White argued that it was in the interest of both his agency and cotton farmers across the South to speed the mechanization of cotton production. In addition, government sponsored research in the areas of engineering, botany and the chemistry of soil fertilization and herbicide—what Clyde Woods has called “affirmative action for planters”—would be deployed to keep southern cotton farmers competitive with the rise of synthetic fibers and cotton production outside the United States. Ultimately, this research complex would also be marshaled to push for crop diversification, encouraging southern farmers to shift their production to corn, soybeans, feed crops, rice cultivation and cattle farming.¹⁰⁹

Excluded from the Stoneville summit, black land grant colleges in the South entered the postwar era endeavoring to delineate a vision of rural modernization that

¹⁰⁸ Gordon B. Hancock, “Statement of Purpose,” in SSCRR, “A Basis,” 4.

¹⁰⁹ Woods, *Arrested Development*, 159-64.

could afford African Americans opportunities to participate in the new agricultural economy. At the center of this work were two rural sociologists, Lewis Wade Jones and Ernest E. Neal. Born in 1910 in Cuero, Texas, Lewis Jones was educated at Fisk University where he returned—after a brief postgraduate interregnum at the University of Chicago—to work closely with his mentor and eventual collaborator, Charles Johnson. Thereafter, Jones spent over a decade teaching in Johnson’s Department of Social Sciences, before earning his PhD in 1955 from Columbia University. Ernest Neal was born little over a year after Jones, in 1911. Raised in rural Tennessee before attending Texas College in Tyler, Texas, Neal was another student of Charles Johnson at Fisk, where he received a Masters degree in Sociology. Neal and Jones were brought together at Tuskegee Institute in 1948, when Neal—at the behest of the Rockefeller Foundation’s General Education Board—had accepted a job directing the Institute’s newly created Rural Life Council. In turn, Neal asked Jones—a scholar he viewed as the “best field researcher on ... black farm families in the South”—to become the Council’s Director of Research.¹¹⁰ Reflecting on their early research at Tuskegee, Neal recalled that “We realized that we had uncovered a problem [rural displacement and mechanization] that was too immense and complex to be handled by Tuskegee Institute or the General Education Board.”¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Ernest Neal, *The Hope for the Wretched: A Narrative Report of Technical Assistance Experiences* (Washington, D.C.: Agency for International Development, 1972), 17.

¹¹¹ Neal, *Hope for the Wretched*, 22.



Figure 1.4. Ernest E. Neal¹¹²

Although in their infancy, efforts to use research and interracial collaboration to apprehend the contours of the South's agricultural revolution began in earnest in Alabama. Held over three days in June of 1950, the Tuskegee Rural Life Conference represented a new stage in the elaboration of rural black developmentalism, and signaled the increasing influence of some of the major intellectual logics of international development discourse and policy. In his opening remarks, Neal noted the conference's intent to focus on "the problems of people in a rapidly changing economy."¹¹³ Unlike Stoneville, however, the Tuskegee conference was an interracial gathering, featuring a wide range of contributions from both the black land grant colleges and the liberal

¹¹² Taken from Neal, *Hope for the Wretched*.

¹¹³ Ernest E. Neal, "Introduction," in Lewis W. Jones, ed., *The Changing Status of the Negro in Southern Agriculture: Proceedings of the Tuskegee Rural Life Conference, 18-20 June 1950* (Tuskegee Institute, 1950), 7.

intellectual establishment, whose work was increasingly turning to questions of economic transition in the global South. In addition, former Bureau of Agricultural Economics bureaucrat Carl C. Taylor was present at the conference, a man who had been instrumental in efforts to democratize the countryside during the New Deal era. By the early 1950s, however, Taylor had left the USDA to begin work as an international aid consultant. Likewise, the keynote address was given by another BAE economist, Arthur Raper, who had an extensive track record as a scholar of southern tenant farming but who had since 1947 been employed by the Department of Defense to work on land reform efforts in occupied Japan.¹¹⁴

Foundational to this emergent developmental discourse was a dichotomous vision of agricultural transition that divided an assortment of rural economic practices into “traditional” and “modern” stages of development. Because he viewed rural modernization as an inevitable fact of progress, Raper had little time to devote to the “well-established customs and traditions ... local practices that have become firmly institutionalized, and the more subtle adjustments being made by the small Negro farmer.”¹¹⁵ The more pertinent question, to Raper’s mind, was whether or not widespread agricultural mechanization represented an “expression of hope” for black farmers. As Raper argued forcefully, to the extent that mechanization would contribute to an enhancement of southern standards of living, then it was to be applauded. For the most part, he was confident that it would. With little regard to a recent and ongoing history that provided ample evidence for a contrary thesis, Raper saw the Rural Life Conference as an opportunity “to plan for the future; a future in which there is to be expected further

¹¹⁴ Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*, 54-55.

¹¹⁵ Raper, quoted in *Changing Status of the Negro*, 23.

lessening of inter- and intra-regional differentials.”¹¹⁶

Raper’s optimism about the potential of agricultural modernization to act as an agent of racial, interregional and national consolidation was not wholly shared by other participants in the conference, however. Indeed, the conference’s deliberations also served as something of a moratorium on agricultural high modernism, and specifically the promise of technological innovation and state-directed research for black agriculturalists. Some participants were skeptical, recognizing that those most effected by the agricultural revolution were capital-poor tenant farmers not positioned to benefit from new, more efficient models of production. As J.R. Otis, the President of Alcorn A & M University noted, “Technology in itself is not the solution to the ills that beset southern agriculture.”¹¹⁷ Rather, Otis argued that the efforts of black land grant institutions in the South had to be directed toward shaping a model of modern farming that emphasized education and sound business practices while reserving a place for a black farming class in the rural South.¹¹⁸

Though skeptical of technology’s promise for black farmers, Otis’ presentation also suggested the extent to which black leaders recognized the political potential of nascent developmental scholarship and knowledge. Indeed, Otis directly cited the work of University of Chicago economist T.W. Schultz, whose major contribution in the field of rural development—*Transforming Traditional Agriculture* (1964)—rebutted the commonly held notion that peasant under-productivity could be explained by rural peoples’ inherent resistance to modernity, and criticized the developmental axiom that

¹¹⁶ Raper, quoted in *Changing Status of the Negro*, 23.

¹¹⁷ Raper, quoted in *Changing Status of the Negro*, 24.

¹¹⁸ J.R. Otis, quoted in *Changing Status of the Negro*, 41.

agricultural sectors could be expected to contribute little to national economic growth, even when offered significant economic incentives.¹¹⁹ In addition, the longstanding criticism of liberal development's evasion of racial conflict remained. As Otis emphasized, southern agriculture was as much defined by racialized exploitation as it was "tradition." "The old plantation system," Otis argued "was the product of an abundance of cheap labor." But here again, the cultural baggage of modernizing assumptions was inescapable. As Otis argued, "Cheap labor is ignorant labor. Ignorance and inertia of doing things in the old way are, in my opinion, responsible for the lag in adjustment on the part of the South."¹²⁰

In much the same vein, Lewis and Jones' scholarship and work in the years following the Conference reflected a latent tension in black developmentalism. While reflecting the extent to which they and other land grant researchers had absorbed the ether of agricultural modernization, the two scholars retained a deep pessimism about black farmers' prospects in the rural South. For the most part, Neal and Lewis were not bullish about the prospects for a black agrarian economy. In an article published in *Rural Sociology* in 1950, the two scholars presented field research that showed a predominance of subsistence farming in rural black communities on small parcels of land, with only a tiny minority of what they termed "progressive" farmers remaining.¹²¹ As such, Lewis and Jones argued that rural African Americans' future was likely "to become the service group for the new agricultural economy."¹²² Proposing that around twenty percent of the

¹¹⁹ Otis, quoted in *Changing Status of the Negro in Southern Agriculture*, 39; T.W. Schultz, *Transforming Traditional Agriculture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964).

¹²⁰ Otis, "Trends in Agriculture Since 1910," in *Changing Status of the Negro*, 42.

¹²¹ Ernest E. Neal and Lewis W. Jones, "The Place of the Negro Farmer in the Changing Economy of the Cotton South," *Rural Sociology* (March, 1950), 30-41.

¹²² Neal and Jones, "The Place of the Negro Farmer," 41.

extent black rural labor force remain in the South, the authors largely accepted the rise of a wage labor-dominated rural South. As they put it:

Tractor drivers are paid wages. They can pay cash for their food just as the urban worker. New machines have to be serviced and repaired, shops need to be developed to perform this function. Pastures have to be fenced off, fence posts have to be chemically treated, and the fences have to be built. The nearby towns that are growing because of industrialization and the movement of people away from farms, need more fresh vegetables, poultry, eggs, and a variety of other things that could be produced on small farms. This is the area ... for the Negro farm owner and small farmer generally to become tied up in the general economy. In providing services her performs a needed function. He does not degenerate to the subsistence farm level. He makes for himself a future and has a sense of importance in the economy.¹²³

In practical terms, Neal and Lewis argued, rural African Americans could do very little to alter structural changes in the southern political economy. They could only follow them, and have faith that spaces of potential profit might be available to those willing to embrace, rather than reject, the forces of southern transformation.

Following the trajectory of scholars like Ernest Neal over the course of the 1950s suggest the extent to which the work of African American developmentalists became ever more imbricated in the global postwar context of the Cold War. Despite limited successes with demonstration farm work in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Neal became increasingly disenchanted with work at Tuskegee University—an institution he viewed as the black community’s “capstone of rural development in the South.”¹²⁴ For the most part, Neal argued, Tuskegee was powerless to halt the ongoing displacement of black farmers. Following the lead of earlier New Deal technocrats, Neal became a proponent of international development. With the assistance of Arthur Raper, Neal secured a position

¹²³ Neal and Jones, “The Place of the Negro Farmer,” 41.

¹²⁴ Neal, *Hope for the Wretched*, 17.

U.S. Technical Assistance Mission to India, which would be the first nation to receive American aid for community development projects. By the time of his death in 1972, Neal had worked for USAID in India, the Philippines, Sierra Leone and Liberia.¹²⁵ As an arch developmentalist, Neal remained steadfast in his conviction that domestic racial reform could in fact be hastened by African Americans' spreading of a universal gospel—development—to other corners of the globe. As he put it in his memoirs, Americans' "acceptance of Negroes as full citizens is dependent upon their ability to become the proponents of a cause bigger than themselves."¹²⁶ Though his daughter—the future Black Panther Party member Kathleen Cleaver—may have argued differently, Neal saw universal politics as a salve to racial injustice. While Neal was serving on the frontlines of international development efforts, he had also recognized the prescience of his earlier work in the rural South. Writing in his autobiography *Hope for the Wretched* (1972), he noted that he and other agricultural experts had:

worked with black educators, professional agricultural workers, and health and social workers to develop programs that would better prepare the migrants for urban living. I think we convinced the professional socially concerned. But anyone familiar with the 1950s knows that the policy makers did very little to solve the problem before the ghettos erupted.¹²⁷

Yet as Neal noted, it was the urban crisis that, more than anything else, compelled attention to the problems of the rural South. Migration—understood by two decades of social science as a moment of modernity-making—was now, belatedly, a social problem

¹²⁵ Satoshi Nakano, "South to South across the Pacific: Ernest E. Neal and Community Development Efforts in the American South and the Philippines," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies* 16 (2005), 181-202.

¹²⁶ Neal, *Hope for the Wretched*, 52.

¹²⁷ Neal, *Hope for the Wretched*, 27.

to be dealt with by technocrats.

DEFINING THE OTHER BLACK AMERICA

Ernest Neal's work in the Global South would only take on greater salience for domestic US politics over the course of the 1960s. As scholars are beginning to recognize, the revival of anti-poverty efforts during the era A. Philip Randolph named the "development decade" was in many senses the return of a boomerang first thrown in the halcyon days of the New Deal.¹²⁸ The intellectual mood of political moment saw its fullest expression in Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962) in which the author chronicled, in direct contrast to the prevailing wisdom of the "affluent society," the presence of resilient deprivation in many corners of the nation. Moreover, Harrington's text argued, in ways to many that might have seemed inconceivable, that the United States housed "an underdeveloped nation, a culture of poverty."¹²⁹ In doing so, Harrington brought the language of international development—and its idiosyncratic theorization of poverty—to bear on the question of domestic policy failure. Moreover, he confirmed the longstanding claims of black developmentalism, which had for the preceding three decades argued vehemently against the prevailing winds—and economic logic—of growth oriented liberalism. Belatedly, the "other black America" had become a matter of national concern, much as Ernest Neal had predicted.

Yet before Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society brought the "War on Poverty" to economically marginalized corners of rural America, President John F. Kennedy's

¹²⁸ A. Philip Randolph, "Africa—Challenge and Crisis," 26 January 1967, <http://kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/50/304/32-130-1122-84-GMH%20ANLCA%20Randolph.pdf>, accessed online 29 February 2016.

¹²⁹ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 159.

administration had effectively admitted that federal development policy had created—or at least not corrected—spatially organized inequalities. In response, the early 1960s saw the rise of policy metaphors—“islands” of poverty and the “mainland” of prosperity—that simultaneously identified spaces of underdevelopment while, in a rhetorical sleight of hand, analytically separating such “backward” spaces from the affluent, modern whole of the United States. If prosperity was a product of the genius of growth-oriented American liberalism, then poverty was increasingly understood in strictly behavioral terms. In this regard, the liberal establishment had been decidedly influenced by the scholarship of the anthropologist (and former New Deal-era USDA technocrat) Oscar Lewis. Through fieldwork in the United States, Puerto Rico and Mexico, Lewis’s scholarship on the “culture” of poverty defined economic deprivation and social maladjustment as a consequence of modernization. As Daniel Immerwahr notes, “in positing a universal condition of poverty, he proposed a framework that would acquire enormous importance in the 1960s.”¹³⁰ But liberals largely flattened the complexities of Lewis’ scholarship, ignoring his attention to economics and history. When Lewis argued that “basic changes in the attitudes and value systems of the poor must go hand in hand with improvements in the material conditions of living,” he spoke like an apostle of modernization theory.¹³¹ As such, it was unsurprising when policymakers were most immediately drawn to Lewis’ findings about culture, which could conveniently be detached from a critique of economic relations while establishing a theoretical pretext for

¹³⁰ Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*, 132-135; for a more detailed assessment of the transnational origins of the “culture of poverty” thesis, see Karin Alejandra Roseblatt, “Other Americas: Transnationalism, Scholarship, and the Culture of Poverty in Mexico and the United States,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 89:4 (2009), 603-641.

¹³¹ Oscar Lewis, quoted in Roseblatt, “Other Americas,” 629.

state interventions to fix the pathologies of the poor.¹³² In sum, it redefined the problem of poverty as a question of individual deficiency, rather than as a failure of the state. The Kennedy administration's solution to its growing awareness of an "Other America" was the Area Redevelopment Administration. As a signature agency of the "New Frontier," the ARA promised targeted, place-based amelioration to longstanding poverty. In most regards, however, the ARA did not represent much of a departure from liberal economic policy of the past. With a relatively small budget of less than \$400 million dollars, the ARA attempted to secure private investment in regions (such as the black rural South) that remained untouched by recent economic growth. The failure of the ARA was in part a familiar story; ignoring the racialized impact of structural transformation in the southern economy, the Administration's emphasis on market-based solutions to poverty proved woefully inadequate. In addition, ARA programs in the rural South were frequently administered by the same class of people—white bankers, lawyers, business owners and planters—that had fatally undermined earlier reform efforts. As one observer of the ARA notes, "while the ARA became part of the drive to end segregation, it also represented the growing obsession with investment and economic development that weakened reform liberalism and overshadowed efforts to address the continued social ills of the region."¹³³

Simultaneously, black developmentalist energies were working their way back into civil rights discourse. By the early 1960s, there were increasing points of convergence between rural development work and the Civil Rights Movement, which

¹³² Roseblatt, "Other Americas," 609.

¹³³ Gregory S. Wilson, *Communities Left Behind: The Area Redevelopment Administration, 1945-1965* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 133.

focused much of its energies on the South's bastions of racial subordination. In November of 1962, representatives of various groups attended a conference hosted by the National Sharecroppers Fund in Bricks, North Carolina. Giving the keynote, Lewis Jones cut straight to the heart of the matter: "The people were not planned for," he argued. "Is it not possible to plan for people, to plan with them, building into the plan their dreams and hopes? Those who say not will usually be found to have a plan: a plan of greed and avarice and exploitation that will carefully ensure plenty to a cunning few."¹³⁴ In his speech, Jones identified the continuing interpolation of bureaucratic and political barriers to black empowerment, while indicating a tendency that would become ever more pronounced as the urban crisis accelerated: "Our concern here," Jones noted,

is not a selfish one. Its focus on the disadvantaged in rural areas is in terms of the national welfare as well as in the terms of the well-being of the people involved. There is living space in the rural areas of the country, more healthful and wholesome living space than that of the crowded city slums into which people pushed off the land tend to gravitate.

As later advocates of black developmentalism would emphasize again and again, the rural South was a *national* issue. No parochial sideshow to be eventually resolved by migration, the consequences of this developmental failure had, in the era of the urban crisis, fundamentally elevated the "problem" of the rural South.

Despite the presence of USDA officials and other federal bureaucrats, the Bricks conference did not skirt the issue of liberal policy failure. As one participant reminded the audience, USDA Assistant Secretary John Baker had publically argued that "economic development must start with the local people." In practice, however, the

¹³⁴ Lewis W. Jones, quoted in National Sharecroppers Fund, *A Better Life for Farm Families: A Report on a Southern Rural Conference sponsored by the National Sharecroppers Fund*, n.d., folder 5491, box 909, RBF.

USDA's Rural Areas Development program continued to exclude African Americans. The New Frontier, attendees charged, "was following the same pattern that made older federal programs fail to meet the challenge of rural poverty." Undoubtedly defensive, federal representatives emphasized that training could allow African Americans to acquire work in the manufacturing jobs that had been established by the Area Redevelopment Administration. From the perspective of one ARA spokesperson, it mattered not "who is hired, but how many are hired; it is concerned with creating new jobs first on a sound, businesslike basis." Clearly unsatisfied with the promise of race-neutral hiring, the audience raised the potential for "all-Negro projects." A Louisiana Priest in the audience went further, arguing that until the power of "local leadership" was removed, people with a "vested interest in low wages, little competition, and tight political control" would continue to deny black economic aspirations.¹³⁵ Finally, the conference closed on a moment of optimism. Despite understandable anxieties that southern economic development might continue to undermine the American labor movement, union representatives found ways to link their cause to a world largely untouched by working class organizing. "One of the themes of this conference is discrimination, and we of the labor movement have lived with discrimination since the day we started to organize workers. Rural people working for economic development and freedom are our allies and he have everything to gain by working together."¹³⁶

¹³⁵ National Sharecroppers Fund, *A Better Life for Farm Families*, 8. It is almost certain that the Priest in question was Father Albert McKnight (see chapter 3).

¹³⁶ National Sharecroppers Fund, *A Better Life for Farm Families*, 10.

CONCLUSION: A UNIVERSAL WAR ON BLACK POVERTY?

In 1964, the President Lyndon Baines Johnson's War on Poverty designated significant federal funding for Community Action Programs and an attendant slogan: "maximum feasible participation." In doing so, the Great Society breathed fresh life into black developmentalism which, as much in the rural South as the urban North, seized on new Office of Economic Opportunity funding to advance the economic aspirations of long marginalized communities. Yet in drawing on the ideas, personnel and experiences of the postwar modernization project, could the War on Poverty address the specificities of black poverty? Driven as it was by an intellectual universalism—of poverty, of people, of history—was it unreasonable to assume that liberal development efforts would continue to obscure considerations of race, class and capitalism? Would the arrival of grassroots, black-controlled, enterprise-oriented Community Development Corporations (CDCs) resolve the riddle of longstanding racial and economic inequality?

In many respects, the Black Power movement transformed the nature of the question itself. In both the South and elsewhere, African American activists held policy makers' feet to the fire. Running roughshod over establishment liberals' watery hopes for "participation without insubordination," black activists pushed to realize the democratic implications of true *community* participation. With astonishing speed, decentralization had become an invitation to new experiments in development, popular organization and protest. It was, to be sure, a rebuttal to the dominant conceits of growth-oriented liberalism. And it would, in time, be the War on Poverty's downfall.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ The classic thesis on the relationship between Black Power and American liberalism—the former causing the downfall of the latter—can be found in Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1984).

When viewed from the perspective of the rural South, however, the linked emergence of Black Power and War on Poverty seems less a moment of radical transformation than the continuation of a longstanding developmental tradition. This was a tradition that borrowed from both modernizing and communitarian strains of developmental thought, a fact that revealed less an intellectual consistency than the ways in which African Americans on the fringes of power and with few resources were forced to work with the conceptual tools at their disposal. As both proponents of racial modernization and communitarian statecraft, however, advocates of black developmentalism would advance a dizzying array of projects in the years following 1965.

CHAPTER 2

A Black Southern Strategy

Robert S. Browne, the Emergency Land and the Struggle for Racial Equity

In 1979, the historian Manning Marable published an essay surveying, against the historiographical grain of much existing scholarship on black life, a rich tradition of African American landholding in the post-bellum South. The efforts of freed people and their descendants had led, by the late nineteenth century, Manning wrote, to the “development of a strong black land base ... [as] an ideological imperative of black thought.”¹ By the late 1970s, however, the relationship between landholding and African American life had grown far more tenuous. Indeed, Manning’s essay was one of ten different pieces published together in an anthology that detailed a precipitous decline in black landholding over the course of the twentieth century. Entitled *The Black Rural Landowner—Endangered Species: Social, Political, and Economic Implications*, the volume began with a table that vividly demonstrated the growth in black-held land after the Civil War (to almost fifteen million acres by 1910), followed by a steady decline, to just over five million acres by the late 1970s. Surveying the implications of this change, the volume’s editors asserted that “developing strategies to arrest the rapid decline of black-owned rural real estate has high priority in the black community.”²

The publication of *The Black Rural Landowner* in 1979 reflected, on the one hand, a widespread revival of interest in the “land question” that had its origins in the

¹ Manning Marable, “The Land Question in Historical Perspective: The Economics of Poverty in the Blackbelt South, 1865-1920,” in *The Black Rural Landowner—Endangered Species: Social, Political, and Economic Implications*, ed. Leo McGee and Robert Boone (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 12.

² Leo McGee and Robert Boone, “Introduction,” in *The Rural Black Landholder*, xx.

political and intellectual upheavals of the late 1960s. But more importantly, the growth of attention to land as a vital resource for African Americans was the result of the groundwork, research and fundraising of one organization in particular: the Emergency Land Fund (ELF). The brainchild of the African American economist and Black Power-era intellectual Robert S. Browne, the ELF was animated by a belief, first and foremost, that “The matter of land and the relationship of black people to land has considerable significance both for the social health of the general society and also for the black community’s own welfare.”³ In the short term, the ELF was a product of the political tumult surrounding the publication of the *Black Manifesto* which, in 1969, had called for the establishment of a “Southern land bank,” capitalized by a two hundred million dollar donation in reparations from white churches and synagogues. Translating radical critique into concrete reality, Browne and the staff of the ELF worked diligently over the course of the 1970s to create one of the most durable institutions of the Black Power era.⁴ By 1973, the ELF held assets valued in excess of \$700,000; by the end of the decade, the organization had grown into a major operation, with an annual operating budget of \$750,000 and dedicated staff of over fifty persons.⁵

The ELF’s work to address the loss of black-held land advanced a model of empowerment for rural African Americans that Browne termed, pithily, a “black southern strategy.” Turning Richard Nixon’s appeal to white southerners on its head, Browne argued that the goal of black self-determination could be most realistically achieved by

³ Black Economic Research Center, *Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black Owned Land in the Rural South* (New York, 1973), 1

⁴ James Forman, “The Black Manifesto,” reprinted in *The Review of Black Political Economy* 1:1 (Spring/Summer 1970), 40.

⁵ “How Blacks Lost Nine Million Acres of Land,” *Ebony* (October 1974), 98; Joseph P. Brooks, “The Emergency Land Fund: Robert S. Browne, the Idea, and the Man,” *Review of Black Political Economy* 35:2/3 (2008), 69.

encouraging the growth of black economic and demographic enclaves in the rural South, and by urging the resettlement of the region with former migrants now living in the North and West.⁶ As Browne put it in an address he gave at Fisk University in 1972, it was the “black counties of the South ... [that] strike us as being the ghettos which merit a major development effort. We feel that the pay-off, if such a thrust is successful, will be far greater than the returns to a comparable investment of resources made anywhere else.”⁷ At the heart of these new, prosperous rural enclaves, Browne and the ELF envisioned, would be a large, vibrant, socially-responsible class of African American landholders who would become model citizens and exemplars of a productive, prosperous black nationhood.

Browne’s commitment to black empowerment in the rural South would, on the face of it, seem consummate with the efflorescent radicalism of the Black Power era. Indeed, over the course of the 1960s and 1970s Browne cemented his status as a central intellectual of the Black Power movement, publishing frequently in journals such as *Freedomways*, the *Black Scholar*, and the *Review of Black Political Economy*.⁸ Exemplary in that regard was Browne’s 1967 article for *Ramparts* magazine, “The Case for Black Separatism,” which argued that “the mood of the ghetto is in a state of

⁶ On the politics of the “Southern Strategy,” see Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1992).

⁷ Robert S. Browne, “Building Viable Ghettoes,” 6 April 1972, folder 25, box 22, Robert S. Browne Papers (hereafter RSBP).

⁸ The only thorough scholarly account of Browne’s life is Judy Wu, “An African-Vietnamese America: Robert S. Browne, the Antiwar Movement, and the Personal/Political Dimensions of Black Internationalism,” *The Journal of African American History* 92:4 (2007), 491-515; Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism During the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

unprecedented change and in this new climate a sense of nationhood is groping for expression” and acknowledged the possibility of a “national partitioning” along racial lines.⁹

Despite the emphasis on land as an anchor of a “territorial nationalism” in much of Browne’s early thought, the ELF’s work was as much motivated by a developmental conception of land as a critical source of capital for the black community. This operative framework placed the organization’s work in line with wider discussions of black equity building in the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁰ In addition, however, Browne and the ELF’s work was deeply indebted to a post-colonial theorization of poverty that viewed the economic stagnation of agricultural “economic sectors” as a critical barrier to economic growth and development.¹¹ In fact, Browne’s attempts to forge what he called a “meaningful” Black Power politics reflected a quite different intellectual genealogy that bore the imprint of his training as a social scientist. Browne was profoundly influenced by his experience working for the US State Department as an economic development technician in southeast Asia during the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as the teachings of the Saint Lucian economist W. Arthur Lewis, whose seminal work on

⁹ Robert S. Browne, “The Case for Black Separatism,” *Ramparts Magazine* (December 1967), 51.

¹⁰ See Robert S. Browne, “Institution Building for Urban Revitalization,” *The Review of Black Political Economy* 10:1 (1979), 34-43. For a white liberal addition to this debate, see Lester M. Salamon, *Black-Owned Land: A Profile of A Disappearing Equity Base* (Durham, NC: Duke University Institute of Policy Sciences and Public Affairs, 1974).

¹¹ Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); As publicity material for the Alliance for Progress, published in 1965, noted: “Agricultural reform programs are strengthening the economies and helping create more equitable social systems ... These measures ... have taken the form of land redistribution; the creation of more secure conditions of land tenure for squatters and other occupants; and programs to strengthen the position of small farmers, such as providing them with agricultural credit.” See United States Agency for International Development (USAID), *The Alliance For Progress: An American Partnership* (December 1965), 9-10.

development economics was critical to the evolution of Browne's thinking.¹²

Only by recognizing this aspect of Browne's thought is it possible to understand what became a critical aspect of the ELF's work: aligning the political imperatives of the Black Power era with the ascendant economic regime of the pro-growth, Sunbelt South.¹³ The answer, the ELF argued, was land. In the vein of classical economic theory, the ELF argued that black held land represented a commodity of unique value that had specific relevance for rural black communities, a resource that had historically undergirded increased political participation and civic engagement. If leveraged as capital, the ELF argued, it might serve as a critical resource for rural economic development.¹⁴ Such claims, however, were out of tune with the economic and legal logics of post-World War II southern development. Premised on a neo-classical conception of economic value, advocates of pro-growth policies in the South often viewed black land—which was frequently idle, mired in inheritance conflicts, or owned by largely poor people with little access to capital or credit—as an obstacle to the development of the region. As the work of the ELF revealed, race-neutral dogmas of “growth” and “development” were, in many instances, antithetical to the cause of black communal empowerment and economic development.

Furthermore, the ELF's efforts were complicated by the object of the “black

¹² For Devin Fergus, this aspect of Browne's biography reveals his “liberal democratic DNA.” See Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 256.

¹³ The literature on the rise of the Sunbelt has been more often than not concentrated on changes in suburban and urban, rather than rural spaces.

¹⁴ Thomas W. Mitchell, “From Reconstruction to Deconstruction: Undermining Black Ownership, Political Independence, and Community through Partition Sales of Tenancy in Common Property,” *Northwestern University Law Review* 505 (2001), 532-544; Mark R. Shultz, “The Dream Realized? African American Land Ownership in Central Georgia Between Reconstruction and World War II,” *Agricultural History* 72: 2 (1998), 298-312.

southern strategy”: the “transitional” people of the black rural South.¹⁵ During the 1970s, Browne and the staff of the ELF discovered that their attempts to forge limited forms of sovereignty and self-determination for rural communities were being inhibited by the landholding practices of African Americans themselves. Thus the “developmental problem” of the black rural South was, as the ELF increasingly argued, both one of white supremacy—what one researcher summarized as the “rip-off process”—*and* one of rural communities’ divergence from modern economic practices.¹⁶ For the organization, this was a problem intimately tied to the legacy of slavery. “Like many other aspects of contemporary black culture and social organization,” one ELF study argued, “black rural land tenure patterns in the Southeastern United States are rooted in the laws and practices of the antebellum South.”¹⁷

But what *Ebony* surmised, in an article on black land loss, as the result of “ignorance” was in fact a phenomenon rooted in the social and economic fabric of the rural South. As the ELF’s research on black land tenure practices gradually revealed, the economic organization of rural communities frequently deviated from the extant legal conventions that regulated the transmission of property ownership and inheritance. This divergence was particularly evident in the widespread practice of collective landholding that above all else represented one of the few recourses of families and communities

¹⁵ A “transitional” framing of various populations was a fundamental tenet of developmental thought that can be attributed to the political scientist and modernization theory intellectual, Lucien Pye. As he argued in 1962, a guiding principle of technocratic knowledge was in the “assisting and strengthening those transitional peoples who would build democratic societies. See Pye, *Politics, Personality and Nation Building: Burma’s Search for Identity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 300.

¹⁶ The institutionalization of white supremacy in federal agencies—particularly the USDA—has been ably documented by Pete Daniel. See Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Emergency Land Fund, “The Impact of Heir Property on Black Rural Land Tenure in the Southeastern Region of the United States,” Submitted to the United States Department of Agriculture (1980), 14.

occupying a precarious, marginal position in the political economy of the rural South. But as the ELF argued, such landholding practices were inimical to the overarching goal of black economic development because they reduced the productive potential and value of black-held land, and increased the likelihood that property would be lost to corporations, land speculators, local whites or state governments.¹⁸ Thus, much of the ELF's work was geared toward affecting an accommodation with the legal conventions undergirding the rise of the Sunbelt South. Rather, any attempts to prevent the continuing expropriation of black held land—a process which underpinned southern developmentalism—had to first reform rural land tenure patterns to render black property legally legible and defensible in a court of law. To this end, the ELF consistently emphasized technocratic solutions—including the provision of legal aid, educational workshops, and technical knowledge—that the organization believed was necessary if African Americans were to formalize and defend their claim to land titles—and thus developmental capital—in the rural South.

LAND AND BLACK POLITICAL IMAGININGS

No new development, land and property ownership had long critical to black peoples' understanding of the limits—and possibilities—of freedom in American society. For the enslaved, the opportunity to grow crops afforded not only autonomy and dignity but also underwrote many men and women's access to an informal trade in other commodities, including food, personal items, agricultural equipment and even livestock.¹⁹ During the eighteenth century, landholdings formed the economic backbone

¹⁸ Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 210-249.

¹⁹ On the economic activities of the enslaved, see Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 358-376.

of a significant class of free black property owners, who survived and at times prospered despite the inhospitable racial and legal climate of the slave South. Indeed, observant white southerners such as St. George Tucker, a William and Mary University legal scholar (and advocate of African colonization) recognized that land ownership deepened African Americans' investment in American society, and undergirded hopes of eventual prosperity. As Tucker wrote in 1796, by "incapacitating them from holding lands," it might be possible for whites to "effectually remove the foundation of [black] ambition."²⁰

Despite Tuckers' hopes, landed African American ambition was far from stifled. By 1860, a black yeomanry had clawed itself into existence in the rural South. Though in part a defensive practice designed to ameliorate the vicissitudes of white supremacy, black landholding also took on an increasingly political character, one that linked the citizenship claims of the enslaved and newly freedpeople to the larger American political landscape. By the dawn of Reconstruction, as Steven Hahn has noted, African Americans "had become familiar with and could appropriate a powerful, if contested national political discourse that exalted manual labor and associated freedom with economic independence."²¹ Despite only minimal assistance from federal officials and widespread hostility from many southern whites, African Americans had developed a land-rooted political imaginary that combined nationalist sensibilities of territorial sovereignty and racial separatism with liberal values of civic responsibility, republican virtue and agrarian democracy.

Nor did efforts to aggrandize black landholdings and property ownership abate

²⁰ St. George Tucker, quoted in Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 26.

²¹ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 135.

under the onslaught of Redemption and the rise of Jim Crow. While black farmland began its precipitous decline after 1910, land-based development strategies became a fundamental aspect of how power was exercised in the segregated South. From the “privatopias” of coastal areas to the use of real estate as a tool of governance in the urban South, access to land afforded African Americans a semblance of protection, uplift and power in a world defined by state sponsored racial apartheid. In turn, the importance of landed autonomy was further dramatized by the work of the civil rights movement, when economic sanctions against both black activists and local people—including evictions, firings and a range of other intimidations—were frequently deployed by white southerners to stem efforts to bring about the demise of Jim Crow. Moreover, as Charles Payne notes in his magisterial *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, landowners in the rural South were more likely to have been involved in the movement. Landowners, Payne argues, “were more optimistic about the future, had a higher sense of personal efficacy...owning land made them feel like somebody, made them more independent and self-reliant.”²²

FROM BRONZEVILLE TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

To understand the emergence and evolution of the Emergency Land Fund, however, it is first necessary to account for the influence of organization’s guiding intellectual force: Robert S. Browne. Born in 1925 to a middle-class family in the Woodlawn section of Bronzeville on Chicago’s South Side, Browne was a generation older than many of the Black Power Movement’s most prominent proponents. In a

²² Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours*, 86-114; N.B.D. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 281.

number of important respects he was born, raised and politicized in a very different era. As Judy Wu, Browne's sole historian has noted, "Coming of age in the Great Depression, he also developed a fascination for economics, a social conscience, and a sense of social responsibility."²³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Browne, like many others of his generation, was drawn to the formal study of economics. Browne's introduction to the field of inquiry came in 1941, when he enrolled at the University of Illinois. At the time, Browne was the only African American student studying the discipline. As he recalled in an interview with the Black Arts Movement poet Kalamu ya Salaam in the late 1970s, his choice was in a sense determined by a powerful sense that economic issues were "of great concern at that time."²⁴ Browne was also deeply affected by visceral memories of state-imposed austerity, and the seeming incongruence of "the government dyeing a massive mountain of raw potatoes a deep blue color." As he recalled in his memoir, Browne "could not grasp the reasoning ... I think it was at that moment that I decided that would probably major in economics."²⁵

Having graduating from Illinois in 1944, Browne spent two years in the US armed forces; returning to higher education in 1946 on the GI Bill, he enrolled in an MBA program at the University of Chicago, graduating in 1947.²⁶ Finding the world of high finance inhospitable for young, ambitious black male Browne relocated to the South, where he gained work at Dillard University. Following two years in New Orleans (which included an attempt to form a labor union), Browne returned to Chicago in 1949, where

²³ Wu, *Radicals on the Road*, 18.

²⁴ Browne, quoted in Kalamu Ya Salaam, "In the Black: A Portrait of the Economist Robert S. Browne," *Black Collegian* (September-October 1978), 32.

²⁵ Browne, quoted in Wu, *Radicals on the Road*, 56.

²⁶ Browne, quoted in Salaam, "In the Black," 28.

he found employment with the National Urban League as an Industrial Field Secretary, where, as Browne later put it, his work revolved around acquiring “jobs for black people.”²⁷ In April of 1952, increasingly frustrated and disillusioned with his life and career prospects in Jim Crow America, Browne left the US with a plan to sojourn widely across Europe, Africa and the Middle East.²⁸ Returning, one year later, a “vastly richer person,” Browne was desirous of finding work with the United Nations, but succeeded only in acquiring an administrative job with the New York City Housing Department. His taste for global politics whetted, however, Browne spent much of his spare time volunteering for US-based decolonization organizations, such as the American Committee on Africa. It was during this period that Browne met Julius Nyerere, the future President of Tanzania and, no less, a future torchbearer for rural development.

No theoretical abstraction, Browne’s increasingly global vision—and awareness of decolonization struggles—was in fact a product of concrete experiences both in and outside of the US. Critically, Browne did not witness the process the decolonization in the “Third World” from afar, but gained direct experience of the challenge of post-colonial nation building and development in the next stage of his career. For six years beginning in 1955, Browne was stationed in Cambodia and Vietnam, helping—as a program officer, auditor and economist—to administer resources to the two nations as they emerged from under the heel of French colonialism.²⁹

Browne would remain in Vietnam until 1961 when, disillusioned by the direction

²⁷ Browne, quoted in Salaam, “In the Black,” 28.

²⁸ Inspired by accounts of the exploitation of colonized peoples in the African-American press, Browne visited widely across western Europe, while also visiting French North Africa, Libya, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and Turkey. See Robert S. Browne, *Race Relations in International Affairs* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1961), 1-2; Wu, *Radicals on the Road*, 32.

²⁹ Wu, *Radicals on the Road*, 48.

of US policy in the region, he returned home to the United States. Browne's time in southeast Asia, however, had proved foundational to his intellectual development on a number of fronts. As he recalled in a speech he gave in April, 1967, during his time working for the State Department "I was constantly assailed by doubts." On the one hand, his cosmopolitan politics was clearly at odds with his growing uneasiness with US foreign policy in Vietnam, whose ever-increasing interventions was, in Browne's mind, compromising the political sovereignty of the still nascent nation. Moreover, Browne argued that geopolitical concerns were subsuming far more noble ideals, particularly the alleviation of crushing poverty that many in the region were experiencing. As he recalled years later in an unpublished memoir, his last years in southeast Asia had convinced him that the goals he and other social scientists and technocrats had believed they were working for—"a massive effort to alleviate poverty and improve the living condition of deprived people"—were an increasingly minor consideration in the minds of US policymakers.³⁰

Despite these reservations about the legitimacy of US actions in post-colonial Asia, Browne's comments during the 1960s also demonstrated his faith in the major tenets of the postwar liberalism, including the desirability of poverty alleviation, the necessity of technological advancement and the importance of democratic institution building in the world's rural, post-colonial periphery. At the same time, however, Browne clearly held reservations about the way the West's notions of progress were infused with hierarchal notions about race and the supremacy of white, western culture. Browne's reticence to impose reforms on such impoverished populations was noticeable, but not

³⁰ Browne, quoted in Wu, *Radicals on the Road*, 57.

determinative. As he noted, “when one becomes involved in the day-to-day activity of these problems—if he is a sensitive person, at least—he is constantly wondering, “Do I have the right to play God?” because, in a sense, that is what one must do.”³¹ Yet it must be said that the Browne’s developmental disposition tended to win out. As he argued in 1967 at the height of the Black Power era, “I completely subscribe to the importance of helping these underdeveloped (or so-called underdeveloped) countries raise their standards of living so that they are more in consonance with the standards of living here in the West.”³² This Browne evinced a complicated subject position, both as an agent of western progress and as a member of non-white racial minority in the US. For the time being, reconciling the two positions would have to wait.

On his return to the US in 1961, Browne moved to New York City and enrolled in a PhD program in Economics at the City University of New York (CUNY). While continuing his studies, Browne found employment with the Phelps Stokes Fund, a philanthropic organization which, amongst other things, attempted to recruit African Americans for participation in the US foreign service. Browne’s commitment to the study of economics, however, bore fruit. In 1964, Browne found work teaching economics at Farleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, a position he would hold until 1972.³³

Browne’s experiences abroad, however, had also preempted an increasingly active participation in public life, particularly on the subject of the United States’ increasing involvement in Vietnam. In a series of letters to major political figures and the

³¹ Browne, “Economic Development I,” April, 1967, folder 5, box 22, RSBP.

³² Browne, “Economic Development I,” April, 1967, folder 5, box 22, RSBP.

³³ Browne, “The African American as Scholar, Economist and Activist,” in Thomas D. Boston, ed., *A Different Vision: African American Economic Thought, Volume 1* (London: Routledge, 1996), 50.

editor of the *New York Times*, amongst others, Browne assailed the dominant justifications for the American military presence in southeast Asia. As the 1960s drew on, and US involvement intensified, Browne immersed himself in the growing antiwar movement, forging numerous political connections with, and between, both white-dominated pacifist organizations and African American civil rights activists. Indeed, Browne's early public denouncements of the conflict in Vietnam presaged the much later critiques of both Martin Luther King and SNCC, whose statements on the subject only appeared in the late 1960s. By that point, Browne had already done much to build the anti-war movement, playing an important role in proselytizing for peace in his work as a public speaker, while helping to establish a national teach-in movement at US universities. Amidst his antiwar work, Browne also found time to attempt a run for US Senate in New Jersey, and to march with Martin Luther King—at the minister's personal invitation—in Mississippi in 1966, where he took part in James Meredith's March for Freedom.³⁴

THE RISE OF BLACK ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Writing in 1965, Browne noted that “Negroes are already groping toward some new cosmopolitan political arrangements which would relieve them of their dilemma.”³⁵ One such “cosmopolitan” response to the ongoing dilemma of race, rights and inequality was the emergence of the Black Power movement. Over the course of the late 1960s, questions of civil rights and integration were increasingly joined in black political discourse by a new language of empowerment and black nationhood, while new stresses

³⁴ Wu, *Radicals on the Road*, 98-103.

³⁵ Robert S. Browne, “The Freedom Movement and the War in Vietnam,” *Freedomways* 5:4 (1965), 467-480.

were placed on the racial dimensions of economic inequality. Increasingly, black intellectuals initiated a vigorous debate—both amongst themselves and with white liberals—about ways to improve African Americans’ relationship to the national political economy. At the center of this conversation, increasingly, was a new language of economic development. As Browne told an audience at the YWCA Racial Justice Institute in 1969, black economic development was in many ways the “fashionable topic” of the moment.³⁶ By the late 1960s, many Black Power advocates had come to understand the concept as an attractive alternative to Richard Nixon’s “Black Capitalism” initiative which, they argued, did little to address the underlying causes of black poverty.³⁷ Indeed, the increasingly popular diagnosis of African Americans as a colonized population, and the belief that economic development and the building of a “black economy” offered the best possible response to this reality, made Browne’s unique expertise in working on questions of poverty in the aftermath of colonialism aboard especially relevant.³⁸ Browne lectured often on this very confluence in the late 1960s, drawing connections between formerly colonized peoples and the US poor.³⁹

Browne’s understanding of economic development, however, had also been

³⁶ Robert S. Browne, “The Issue of Black Economic Development,” 22 July 1969, folder 10, box 22, RSBP.

³⁷ James Boggs, “The Myth and Irrationality of Black Capitalism,” in Boggs, *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook: A James Boggs Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Ward (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 185-94; Earl Ofari, *The Myth of Black Capitalism* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1970);

³⁸ S.N.C.C. President Stokely Carmichael and the black political scientist Charles Hamilton offered, in 1966, the most famous articulation of this point, arguing that “Black people in the United States have a colonial relationship to the larger society, a relationship characterized by institutional racism. That colonial status operates in three areas—political, economic, social.” See Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1967; repr. 1992), 6.

³⁹ As a flyer announcing a talk on this subject at the MIT Political Science and Center for International Studies noted, Browne would “compare the predicament of rural settings in the US, especially with those of black and other minority settlements, with underdeveloped regions in the Third World. He will also discuss the comparative relevance and forms of outside aid to the development process in foreign and domestic settings in underdevelopment.” See “Robert S. Browne on [the] Colonial Analogy—U.S. Poor & Third World Compared,” box 2, RSBP.

decisively informed by the work of the St. Lucian economist, and Princeton Professor, Arthur W. Lewis. Born in 1915 on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, and educated at the London School of Economics, W. Arthur Lewis' long and distinguished career encompassed work as a functionary of empire in the British Colonial Office and time as an economic advisor to decolonization efforts in Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana.⁴⁰ While balancing public commitments with ongoing academic achievement, Lewis had emerged during the 1950s as a pioneering theorist of a new disciplinary subfield: development economics. Lewis' scholarship centered on two issues that became foundational to the elaboration of the black southern strategy: the role of capital accumulation and the transformation of "traditional" agricultural sectors as a precursor of economic growth. Crucially, Lewis' work advanced an optimism that even the most underdeveloped agrarian economies could—if freed from backwardness of colonial regimes and empowered by state assistance—achieve significant development within a short space of time. Lewis' distaste for what he perceived as the ethnocentric politics of Black Power, however, did not preclude him from establishing a friendship with Browne that continued for over two decades. During a number of visits to Princeton during the 1960s, Browne—the author of "The Case for Black Separatism"—and Lewis, the longtime NAACP member, discovered much common ground. Through their relationship, Browne became ever more connected to tradition of systematic thinking on the question of development that simultaneously challenged one expression of modernity—colonialism—while affirming the necessity of economic and cultural modernization as an essential

⁴⁰ Robert L. Tignor, *W. Arthur Lewis and the Birth of Development Economics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1-78, 109-211.

precondition for the elimination of global inequalities.⁴¹

As such, it was no surprise to find Browne delivering the keynote speech at the National Black Economic Development Conference held in Detroit, Michigan, in April 1969.⁴² Before an assembled audience of more than seven hundred attendees, Browne discussed the relevance of an archetypal strategy of nation building—the economic plan—for black Americans. Browne’s speech, however, stressed repeatedly that as yet the “black community” was far from a “national” entity. As he put it, “We are not yet a consciously cohesive community; we do not have sovereignty over ourself as individuals; we do not have sovereignty of ourselves as a community.”⁴³ Browne also delivered a rebuke to nationalists clamoring for the creation of black political enclaves in urban centers, which, he maintained, represented a flawed basis for nation building. As he told the listeners, “a city is a relatively limited economic unit; it is not usually a viable financial unit these days; and physically a city is an extremely vulnerable unit in that it raises no food and is totally dependent on outsiders for its external communications.” This catalogue of limitations, for Browne, meant that cities “could not serve even as a symbolic homeland for black people — nor could a series of such enclaves.” Rather, Browne believed for “the currently popular ‘parallel economy’ concept” to have any practical meaning, African Americans could not be content with “control of a series of geographically separated communities or cities but only with black control of a unit at

⁴¹ Frederick Cooper, “Modernizing Bureaucrats, Backward Africans, and the Development Concept,” in *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 81-85.

⁴² “Economy Confab Ends in Discord,” *Michigan Chronicle*, May 3 1969, 1A, 4A; “‘Pay \$500 Million—Or Else,’ Blacks Tell Churches,” *Michigan Chronicle*, May 10 1969, 1A, 4A.

⁴³ Browne, “Toward an Overall Assessment of Our Alternatives,” keynote address delivered at the National Black Economic Development Conference, Wayne State University, Detroit, April 27, 1969, reprinted in *The Review of Black Political Economy* 1:1 (Spring/Summer, 1970), 18-26.

least as large as a state.”⁴⁴

Browne’s vision for black nation building at the state level was a world away from the revolutionary fervor commonly associated with the Black Power era. Rather, it evinced what Derrick White has characterized as a “pragmatic nationalism” focused on the employment of myriad strategies of soft power.⁴⁵ For Browne, “numerous local development projects,” including “small business programs, job training, consumer education, vocational guidance, school improvement and other community programs” had to be fundamental aspects of any nation building project. Moreover, Browne’s speech suggested his faith in the efficacy of technocratic knowledge. For Browne, such expertise was largely absent in the black community and could be the missing ingredient in a larger scheme of empowerment. As he explained to his audience, only through an “extensive corps of black technicians” would it be possible for African Americans to carve out a “viable economic unit from which to build a tangible sense of community and of cultural autonomy.”⁴⁶ The foot soldiers of the black revolution, then, were not to be radical intellectuals or community activists, but a new class of operatives trained in the techniques of communitarian statecraft and modernity-making. As Browne asked, “Where today are the black men who can design, build, and operate giant bridges, hydro-electric installations, water works and sewage disposal plants, massive port facilities, and other basic elements of the physical infra-structure of a modern society?”⁴⁷

Browne’s speech also sought to distance his view of black economic development

⁴⁴ Browne, “Toward an Overall Assessment,” 18-26.

⁴⁵ Derrick E. White, “‘Black World View’: The Institute of the Black World’s Promotion of Pragmatic Nationalism, 1969-1974,” *The Journal of African American History* 95:3-4 (2010), 369-391.

⁴⁶ Browne, “Toward an Overall Assessment,” 18-26.

⁴⁷ Browne, “Toward an Overall Assessment,” 18-26.

from the other major economic paradigm of the era: Black Capitalism. Browne himself was clear on where he stood. Though “some of the most militant Black nationalists ... have been the first to jump on the bandwagon,” Browne argued that “people must be educated to understand that any black man or Negro who is advocating a perpetuation of capitalism inside the United States is in fact seeking not only his ultimate destruction and death, but is contributing to the continuous exploitation of black people all around the world.” He continued: “We have always resisted the attempts to make us capitalists. It is in the financial interest of the U.S. to make us capitalists, for this will be the same line as that of integration into the main-stream of American life.”⁴⁸

Browne’s distinction between a white-authored “black capitalism” and a black controlled model of “economic development” revealed an intellectual fault line on the question of capitalism—and black people’s relationship to capitalism—that coursed through the political clamor of “nation time.” But it also posed politically fraught questions about black empowerment efforts’ relationship to the liberal center of American life. As Browne recalled, the weekend of the National Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit coincided with another, more moderate (liberal) gathering at Arden House in Herriman, New York. At that inter-racial conference, where black business delegates called for “a new concept of American economic organization,” Browne noted the “soft tones” of the dialogue that took place in the opulent surroundings of the seventy-room mansion.⁴⁹ The reality, of course, was more complicated, for the “militant” Black Economic Development Conference was itself funded by the Economic

⁴⁸ Browne, “Toward an Overall Assessment,” 18-26.

⁴⁹ “Assembly Told Negroes Want Changes in Capitalism,” *New York Times*, 27 April 1969, 62.

Development Corporation of Greater Detroit, a white-run business association.⁵⁰

Meanwhile at the Arden House Conference, one black attendee had demanded that African Americans to be afforded “what the nation has done for the farmer, for the oil industry, the railroads, the airlines, for the Rockefellers, the Fords, and the Harrimans ... We want opportunity. We want subsidy.”⁵¹

ORIGINS OF THE SOUTHERN LAND BANK

Ascendant black radicalism, however, had also provided a foundational text for the developmental work that would come to define the efforts of Robert Browne. In the Black Manifesto, James Forman and cohort of other signatures called for:

the establishment of a Southern land bank to help our brothers and sisters who have to leave their land because of racist pressure ... We have seen too many farmers evicted from their homes because they have dared to defy the white racism of this country. We need money for land. We must fight for massive sums of money for this Southern Land Bank.⁵²

Yet as Browne later noted of the “Black Manifesto” era, James Forman “had put forward an incredibly effective sounding program, yet created no organization to carry it out.”⁵³ In late 1969, he signed off on the first tentative steps toward the creation of what, in time, would become the Emergency Land Fund. Enclosed in a letter to Owen Brooks, member of the Delta Ministry, and head of the newly formed Southeast Regional Economic Development Association (SEREDA), was a check from the organizers of the Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC) for four and a half thousand dollars, an

⁵⁰ “Capitalism’s Foes Aided By Business,” *New York Times* (Nov. 16 1969), 115.

⁵¹ “Assembly Told Negroes Want Changes in Capitalism,” *New York Times*, 27 April 1969, 62; for an overview of the conference, see William F. Haddad and G. Douglas Pugh, eds., *The American Assembly: Black Economic Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

⁵² “The Black Manifesto,” http://www.episcopalarchives.org/Afro-Anglican_history/exhibit/pdf/blackmanifesto.pdf, accessed online 15 February 2016.

⁵³ Browne, quoted in Salaam, “In the Black,” 36.

amount that would fund “research preliminary to the formulation of the proposed Southern Land Bank.” As Browne wrote to Brooks, a fellow northerner who shared his belief in the necessity of organizing for African Americans’ independent political and economic power, “It is our fervent wish that the launching of the Southern Land Bank will constitute the opening of a new era in the fortunes of the Black man in America by providing an effective vehicle through which Black people can achieve a significant measure of economic and social independence and self-fulfillment.”⁵⁴

Slow progress and meager resources, however, consistently tempered high aspirations in the early years of the project. Indeed, it would not be until the early 1970s that Browne’s organization had the resources to employ a staff in the South. The first formal meeting of the Southern Land Bank took place on September 19, 1969, when, in the aftermath of the *Black Manifesto*, Browne had received a small amount of funding from the National Council of Churches Department of Social Justice to explore ideas and strategies.⁵⁵ The meeting’s roster, however, reveals the breadth of interest in the “land question” amongst a community of activists, intellectuals and economic development workers in the rural South in the late 1960s and 1970s. Held in Atlanta, attendees at meeting included Vincent Harding, head of the Institute of the Black World (IBW), Charles Sherrod of the Southwest Georgia Project, Milton Henry of the Republic of New Africa (RNA), William Busby of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC), John Brown of the Southeast Alabama Self Help Association and Floyd McKissick, formerly

⁵⁴ Browne to Owen Brooks, 1 December 1969, box 45, Black Economic Research Center Records (hereafter BERC). As Mark Newman points out, Brooks’ politics represented a more militant strand of the southern civil rights movement that rejected the assumption that middle class African Americans or white moderates held much interest in assisting the plight of poor and impoverished African Americans. See Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 180-196, 224.

⁵⁵ BERC, *Only Six Million Acres*, 5.

of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE).⁵⁶ Clearly, land politics had galvanized—and was in some senses a product of—a growing recognition that in the post-civil rights era, a truly emancipatory agenda could not afford to ignore spaces long understood as the principal nexus of racial exploitation and degradation.

As critical as any of the other conference attendees to the formulation of the Southern Land Bank, however, was Randolph T. Blackwell, a trained lawyer and social scientist who was at that moment head of Southern Rural Action (SRA), an anti-poverty organization working on economic development projects in the rural South. Despite confessing that the entire process of creating the Land Bank was “a bit of a rush job,” Browne reiterated to Blackwell that he believed him to be “the most qualified person” to advise on the project. To Browne’s mind, the process of conducting research, or as he put it, “hard-nosed preparation,” was essential. Without “a clear idea of what we are implementing,” and “a detailed plan of his it is proposed to be achieved,” Browne noted, “I fear that neither the black community nor potential funders would be inclined to take us seriously.”⁵⁷

In early 1970, Blackwell’s research eventually led to the completion of an extensive report on the feasibility of black land accumulation. The report—which Browne referred to as a “working paper”—argued that above all else the “principal aim of the proposed Land Bank is to commence an essential building of an economic base for rural black people by opening to them an access to productive land for their farming and non-farming enterprise needs.”⁵⁸ Retreating from earlier notions that church-owned land

⁵⁶ “Persons Attending Rural Economic Development Meeting--Atlanta, Georgia,” box 45, BERC.

⁵⁷ Browne to John Brown, 31 October 1969, box 45, BERC.

⁵⁸ Browne to Timothy Jenkins, 20 March 1970, box 45, BERC; Randolph Blackwell, “Land Bank Study,” Emergency Land Fund Papers (hereafter ELF).

could possibly be a potential resource, Blackwell argued instead that the federal government—as the “largest single land holder in the country”—represented a far more promising avenue of exploration. To make this case, Blackwell pointed to a “golden thread of good land policies” that could be used a precedent for making claims to governmental assistance. In particular, Blackwell pointed to the Homestead Act of 1862, which he argued “was based on the central concept that a popular access to basic land resources ... was good for the community and Nation.”⁵⁹

Attempts to call on the collective resources of the SEREDA became increasingly difficult, however, as disagreement over basic questions of strategy, the pace of action and the means of raising funding emerged. Indeed, the SEREDA had submitted their own grant proposal to the BEDC in 1969. In it, the nascent organization had proposed, among other things, to conduct an assessment of church-owned property that might be available, establish communication and institutional relationships with other African American groups working on such projects in the South, and to hire a permanent staff member to coordinate the organization’s efforts. Browne’s concern remained that SEREDA proposal was, for the time being, wildly ambitious, and that it seemed “to by-pass almost totally the necessary first stages which I, and I thought the group ... had indicated was the priority: namely, to undertake some serious research into the various forms which a large scale land bank might take ... [and] which could attract massive funding under black control.”⁶⁰

The eventual completion of Blackwell’s lengthy report, though, provided at least a basis for discussion in rural development circles. Debate and contention still remained,

⁵⁹ Blackwell, “Land Bank Study,” ELF.

⁶⁰ Browne to John Brown, 31 October 1969, box 45, BEREC, 45.

however. As Browne had mentioned to Blackwell in a letter late in 1969, there was an ongoing dispute as to the “various formats which the Land Bank might assume.” As Browne explained, “It is my feeling that some persons probably envision a mainly ‘financing’ type of organization and others envision a ‘land-holding’ type of organization, or land trust ... I think that this is a very fundamental question and merits the fullest possible discussion.” Discussion, however, had its limits. As Browne recalled two years later, “The principal conclusion which emerged from this entire series of discussions ... was that no meaningful action on the land question was likely to materialize unless a substantial sum of money was made available for that purpose.”⁶¹ Moreover, Blackwell’s efforts to secure funding for the report had heightened conflict with the SEREDA, whose members worried that their authority was being usurped. Tensions were (seemingly) resolved when John Brown, acting head of SEREDA, wrote to Browne and reported that at the organization’s monthly meeting there had been “an open and pointed discussion relating to Randy’s action in presenting a proposal over his personal signature ... It is my personal feeling that our major differences were resolved and that we are off to a good start in a long mutual working relationship.”⁶²

Such growing pains and institutional conflict continued to hamper the land bank project. As Browne had complained to Blackwell in late 1969, “there is more suspicion and pettiness than I had feared.” Browne, however, was still “optimistic that a satisfactory group effort can be effected,” though he continued to worry that the fate of the land bank might be placed in jeopardy by the continued infighting between the two groups. As Browne remarked in March of 1970, neither the northern-based BEDC nor the

⁶¹ BERC, *Only Six Million Acres*, 6.

⁶² John Brown to Robert S. Browne, 28 October 1969, box 45, BERC.

southern SEREDA were “very strong and the Southern Land Bank should not be subjected to the unforeseeable fortunes of either.”⁶³ Such fears were confirmed later that month, however, when Browne informed Owen Brooks about the irreparable divisions that had emerged at the organization’s previous meeting in Montgomery, Alabama. As Browne admitted, he was “extremely distressed that the cooperative relationship between BEDC and SEREDA could not be worked out.” Changing his tactics, Browne advised Brooks that it would now be best “to move ahead with this project as rapidly as possible, independently of outside persons. Once we have a viable institution launched, it is my hope that we will then invite other interested persons to join with us.”⁶⁴

As many of the critical early influences on the nascent black southern strategy understood, ideas required institutions. Established by Robert Browne in October of 1969, the Black Economic Research Center (BERC) committed itself to “assisting and expediting the process of Black economic development through the use of creativity, scholarship and activism.”⁶⁵ Despite being a self-consciously black institution, pragmatism—specifically, the need for funding—dictated an ongoing engagement with the liberal anti-poverty community and a new Republican administration touting the benefits of black entrepreneurialism. The BERC was itself established with grants from the Ford Foundation and the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, while Browne continued to press his own connections—such as his position on the board of the National Sharecroppers Fund—for the resources necessary to establish the land

⁶³ Brown to Timothy Jenkins, 20 March 1970, box 45, BERC.

⁶⁴ Browne to Owen Brooks, 2 April 1970, box 45, BERC.

⁶⁵ BERC, “Three Associated Black Institutions”; John W. Handy, “The Emergence of the Black Economic Research Center and the Review of Black Political Economy: 1969-1972,” *Review of Black Political Economy* 35 (September 2008), 78; Salaam, “In the Black,” 26.

bank. Browne also crossed ideological barriers to solicit funding from Theodore Cross, the author of *Black Capitalism* and President Nixon's new head of the Office of Economic Opportunity.⁶⁶ As Browne wrote at the time, though he maintained that the Land Bank had to be a black controlled project, he could not rule out efforts to "extract whatever it seems possible to extract under the government aegis which could be useful to black people."⁶⁷ By early 1971, the BEREC had secured grants from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Cooperative Assistance Fund and, more significantly, had received a donation of two million dollars from a wealthy white stockbroker Browne had known since the early 1960s.⁶⁸

As conspicuously, Browne—along with a number of prominent black activists and public figures, including Julian Bond, James Forman, Fannie Lou Hamer, Muhammad Kenyatta and Vincent Harding—had accumulated the money necessary to place a fund-raising advertisement in the *New York Times*, which appeared in April of 1971. Posing a simple question, the advertisement asked "Must all blacks flee the South?"⁶⁹ In the short term, Browne had envisioned the appeal as a means to prevent the loss of an extensive tract of land held by the Nation of Islam in Asheville, Alabama.⁷⁰ As Browne wrote in a letter to his fellow members of the land bank committee, "We had originally built this idea around an appeal for funds to buy the land which the Muslims were abandoning, on the theory that so quick a retreat on the part of the Muslims would

⁶⁶ For his major treatise on the issue, see Theodore L. Cross, *Black Capitalism: Strategy for Business in the Ghetto* (New York, 1969); see also "An Interview with Theodore L. Cross," *Black Enterprise* (June 1973), 87-96.

⁶⁷ Browne to Jesse Morris, April 6, 1970, ELF.

⁶⁸ Salaam, "Portrait in Black," 163-64.

⁶⁹ "Must all Blacks Flee the South?" *New York Times*, 26 April 1970.

⁷⁰ To trace the history of the Nation of Islam's landholding in Alabama and Georgia, see: "Black Muslim Farm is Accepted in Georgia," *New York Times*, 12 December 1969, 33; "Poison is Suspected in Death of 30 Cows On a Muslim Farm," *New York Times*, 16 March 1970.

be harmful to the black movement all across the South.”⁷¹ As Browne later noted, however, the advertisement was as a “financial failure,” recouping less in contributions than the cost of the placement itself.⁷²

RESEARCHING THE LAND QUESTION

Thus by early 1971, the Land Bank Project accumulated the funds necessary to take more tangible steps toward addressing the loss of black-held land. With the necessary funds in place, a conference to further develop solutions to the “land problem” was called at Clark College in Atlanta in late June of 1971.⁷³ As the conference proceedings revealed, Browne and others’ belief in the imperative of addressing the issue of black landholding in the South was based on a widely shared intellectual presumption that land, in the abstract, represented a crucial aspect of black nation building. Less clear, for the most part, were the underlying *causes* of African American land loss. African American’s “direct interest in the land” was, for the most part, a far clearer historical fact than a comprehensible economic or sociological reality. As Vivian Henderson, President of Clark, noted in his opening remarks, there was an “urgent” need for the accumulation of material, data and knowledge on the issue of black-owned land.⁷⁴

Attended by over two-dozen concerned figures, the Clark conference dealt primarily in anecdotal descriptions of the task. “Most of the participants,” a summary of the meeting noted, had “personal knowledge of cases where black families had in the past lost sizeable tracts of land against their will, often out of ignorance or poverty and

⁷¹ Browne to Fannie Lou Hamer, Julian Bond, Vincent Harding, and Muhammad Kenyatta, 28 March 1970, box 45, BERC.

⁷² BERC, *Only Six Million Acres*, 6.

⁷³ BERC, *Only Six Million Acres*, 7.

⁷⁴ Vivian Henderson, “First Session of the Land Bank Conference,” 28 June 1971, ELFP.

sometimes as a result of cunning on the part of hostile or covetous whites.”⁷⁵ Participants were largely in agreement that the imperative of land retention had to be first and foremost motivated by a rational conception of economic value, as opposed to any humanitarian or symbolic concerns. “An important factor,” the conference transcript recorded, was “the inability of many black owners to make their land a profitable investment for themselves.” Pessimism about the future of black rural life also abounded. With numerous participants of the opinion that “agriculture would never again provide liveable incomes” for a large proportion of African Americans in the rural South, attendees argued that “land selected to be saved or acquired would be chosen for its overall political and economic impact.”⁷⁶

The meeting’s emphasis on a rationalized approach to landed development efforts was also apparent in a general consensus reached on the necessity of developing a black technical class capable of intervening in the bureaucratic dimensions of racial exploitation in the rural South. Rooting high-minded rhetoric in reality, one participant argued that “The only way we can get control, the only way we can exercise self-determination, the only way we can talk about liberating is to have some skills.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, participants argued that it was insufficient to identify the role of local taxation policies—as the Emergency Land Fund would later do—as a mechanism of maintaining white supremacy without taking steps to transform the levers of power that maintained the people of the black rural South as a subordinate class. But this could be fixed. As the Black Economic Research Center’s report on the conference noted, the

⁷⁵ BERC, *Only Six Million Acres*, 8.

⁷⁶ BERC, *Only Six Million Acres*, 10-11.

⁷⁷ “First Session of the Land Bank Conference,” ELF.

“near vacuum of black land surveyors and appraisers was cited as an example of a deficit area of black expertise” that, if addressed, would provide a tool to challenge institutions that were upholding white supremacy. As such, participants agreed that the development of a “black managerial class” and an “expanded pool of black technicians” capable of working in the South to defend the legal rights of black landholders was essential.⁷⁸

The planners of the Southern Land Bank, however, lacked substantive data on the underlying reasons for the spectacular erosion of black held land since the beginning of the twentieth century. Nor did the planners have a firm comprehension of the more immediate causes of land loss in the postwar era. The process of accumulating this knowledge, however, began in earnest in the summer of 1971, when the Black Economic Research Center organized what it termed a “Special Land Research Project.” Browne requested that his researchers, many of whom were students, work to “Identify ... the counties where black people have the greatest potentials for self-development—either because of population, political action, or political base.” In addition, Browne noted that, where possible, the researchers attempt to observe, and catalogue, “the methods by which black have been losing their land—Voluntary sale, emergency sale, tax sale, foreclosure, title dispute, other” and “the techniques which might serve as the most effective inhibitors of these various types of land-loss.”⁷⁹ Browne also encouraged researchers to accumulate data on the employment profile of counties, in order to assess whether the skills profile of rural African Americans could be deployed in potentially fruitful economic development projects.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ “First Session of the Land Bank Conference,” ELF.

⁷⁹ Robert S. Browne to Researchers on the Land Project, 1 June 1971, ELF.

⁸⁰ Browne to Jesse Morris, 8 March 1971, ELF.

What the subsequent research undertaken in Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina and Georgia revealed was that the causes of black land were first and foremost intertwined with specific, local modes of economic exploitation that, collectively, upheld the economic and political prerogatives of white southerners. In addition, ELF researchers noted that the issues facing black property owners were also partially a product of the peculiarities of black landholding culture. In a report submitted to the ELF in late 1971, Michael Figures—a University of Alabama law student on summer break who would go on to become a crucial ELF staff member—identified a number of key mechanisms he believed were at the crux of the problem of land loss: tax sales, partition sales and mortgage foreclosures. Though both tax and partition sales were rare, Figures noted, it was the third—mortgage foreclosures—that he argued constituted the heart of the problem. “All one has to do,” Figures’ report observed, was to “pick up a copy of his local newspaper to readily see the magnitude of this problem.” Mortgage foreclosures, Figures argued, were most often a product of black landowners’ difficulty in obtaining credit. African American landholders, Figures reported, often entered into “agreements that resembled mortgages but really weren’t. They were, in effect, agreements to automatically convey title to the mortgage upon default by the debtor. Such conveyance was made without the aid of any type of judicial action. This type of arrangement is spoken of ... in the area as ‘vancing’.”⁸¹

Other reports collected during 1971 expanded upon the basic aspects of Figures’ claims. In his study of southeast Virginia, John Cooper found that black landholding was under threat because “people (especially Blacks) just do not pay their property taxes.” In

⁸¹ Michael A. Figures, “Final Report: Southern Land Project/Alabama Region,” in BEREC, *Only Six Million Acres*, B1-B19.

the case of unpaid taxes on land, ownership of the property in question would be transferred to anyone assuming responsibility for the unpaid taxes. Land ownership was also under threat, Cooper argued, by the decline of local employment opportunities, and the rise of land speculation related to the growth of the leisure and tourism industry. More perniciously, Cooper noted the role a Florida-chartered business played in taking advantage of a rural housing crisis that had been intensifying over the course of the 1960s.⁸² Offering “instant credit and mortgage financing” to low-income rural residents, the company expected deed to the land as collateral for the loan. The result in southeast Virginia, Cooper noted, had been a rash of foreclosures, a pattern which revealed a basic issue, for all the families involved “owned property without having some basic knowledge necessary to care for and hold on to the land. Often people have no idea of the true market value of their land. They accept the value given it by the county for tax purposes or the value assigned by the company that is now trying to take it away.” This situation, coupled again with an endemic absence of legal counsel, convinced Cooper that “any solution to a land problem ... must educate, counsel and even be able to supply funds where necessary to help save land if it is to be an effective land retention agency.”⁸³

As the ELF was thus discovering, manipulative practices—what Michael Figures referred to as “the ‘rip-off process’”—were indeed a critical factor in the decline of black land-holding. This broad conceptual umbrella was a wide one; as ELF researchers testified to again and again, such pernicious techniques included state-initiated use of

⁸² John D. Cooper, “Black Land Retention in Southeast Virginia,” August 31, 1972, in BERC, *Only Six Million Acres*, G-1-G15. For more on black developmentalist politics’ response to the rural housing crisis, see Chapter Four.

⁸³ Cooper, “Black Land Retention in Southeast Virginia,” BERC, *Only Six Million Acres*, G-1-G15.

eminent domain laws, the habit of delinquent tax payments being made by white land-speculators, nefarious lending practices by local banks, and the less-than-trustworthy legal advice of white lawyers. As Lewis Myers' report on the situation in the Mississippi Delta region noted, "There is serious evidence that white bankers, federal loan agencies (FHA and Federal Land Bank) and local merchants conspire to force blacks into foreclosure." Moreover, Myers reported, "There have been examples of reprisals taken against blacks who helped fellow blacks to take their land." For Myers, this reality meant that there was no more key issue than financing, and viewed the Land Bank as an institution that could "guarantee capital" and create "alternatives to the presently white controlled Federal Home Administration and the Federal Land Bank." The problem of fair access to capital, Myers argued, was borne out by his interviews with local residents, many of whom believed that a "land bank could serve as a corrective force for many of the farmers ills."⁸⁴

Tasked with lending programmatic coherence to this research—published in 1973 as *Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black Owned Land in the Rural South*—was a growing ELF staff. As important as any person to the development of the organization was its newly-appointed President, Joseph Brooks, who had fortuitously become acquainted with Robert Browne when both had published articles in the October 1971 issue of the *Black Scholar*. Though enrolled in a doctoral program in City and Regional Planning at UC-Berkeley, Brooks had also joined the Republic of New Africa (RNA), and had adopted the name Yusufu Sonebeyatta. His piece in the *Black Scholar*, entitled "Ujamaa for Land and Power," detailed the RNA's efforts to gain territorial sovereignty

⁸⁴ Lewis A. Myers, "Southern Land Project/Mississippi Delta Region," in BEREC, *Only Six Million Acres*, D1-D10.

for African Americans by establishing what he called “Ujaama production service units” in Hinds and LeFlore counties, Mississippi.”⁸⁵ Inspired by rural development work in socialist Tanzania, Brooks’ call for black nation building was premised on a series of state-building efforts. Among many RNA goals, Brooks argued, was recognition by the United Nations, the creation military force for the defense of black property and land in the South, and the establishment of trade relationships between the rural South and other areas of the Global South. As Brooks recalled of his first meeting with Browne, though “he didn’t embrace all of what was suggested, he liked the way I had set up my arguments ... [and] outlined steps for blacks to seek independence with land ownership and control as the center piece.”⁸⁶ By contrast, Browne’s article—entitled “Black Economic Autonomy”—offered a more prosaic view of the possibility of creating a black economy capable of functioning separately within the United States.”⁸⁷

With Brooks on board, the first half of the 1970s saw the Fund working tirelessly to expand the institutional base of the black southern strategy. One such organization that the ELF developed ties with was Black Land Services whose work, like the Fund, was underpinned by a belief that “in the South land constitutes the greatest potential economic asset which Black people have.”⁸⁸ Led by Charles E. Washington, a crusading local lawyer from coastal South Carolina, Black Land Services was a programmatic outgrowth of the work of Penn Community Services and the historic Penn Center, which since the mid-nineteenth century had been an institutional hub of black education, civil rights

⁸⁵ Yusufu Sonbeyatta (Joseph P. Brooks), “Ujaama for Land and Power,” *Black Scholar* (October 1971), 14.

⁸⁶ Sonbeyetta, “Ujaama,” 14.

⁸⁷ Robert S. Browne, “Black Economic Autonomy,” *The Black Scholar* (October 1971), 27.

⁸⁸ Penn Community Services (hereafter PCS), “Project Black Land,” 21 June 1971, folder 4986, box 828, Rockefeller Brothers Fund Papers (hereafter RBF).

organizing and community development.⁸⁹ In some senses, patterns of property ownership and land expropriation in the Sea Islands were a mirror to the rest of the South. As the *Beaufort Gazette* reported in 1974, “Land—and the emotional and political power that comes with it—has been slipping through the fingers of rural blacks.”⁹⁰ Yet what made black land loss in coastal areas such as Hilton Head and St. Helena Island a paramount concern was its proximity to the path of Sunbelt recreational and residential land development. After making contact with over ten thousand South Carolina property holders, Black Land Services realized that some properties could be appraised for as much as \$50,000 per acre. A mixed blessing, increased property values came with increased tax burdens which—when combined with existing, unequal tax laws—placed a unique and hugely punitive financial burden on African Americans landowners.⁹¹

Beginning in the late 1960s, much of Penn Community Services’ development work focused on the creation of “designated growth areas” in coastal communities.⁹² In conjunction with financial assistance from the BERC, Penn attempted to link black-owned land to the expertise and standing of local African American business interests. Penn hoped that Black Land Services could function as a non-profit corporation with the financial wherewithal to purchase properties at tax sales. In turn, real estate would be “placed in the hands of Black entrepreneurs as a tool of production.”⁹³ Coastal areas were explicitly identified as potential spaces of black economic development, while Penn

⁸⁹ For an overview of the Penn Center, see Orville Vernon Burton and Wilbur Cross, *Penn Center: A History Preserved* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

⁹⁰ “Conference Explores the Future of Black-Owned Land,” *Beaufort Gazette*, 17 February 1975.

⁹¹ Burton and Cross, *Penn Center*, 100. As Jo Ann Hickey notes, another factor in raising land values was the increasing pressure of suburban development. See Jo Ann S. Hickey, “Agribusiness, Virginia’s Black Farmers,” in *Encyclopedia of African American Business History*, ed. Juliet E.K. Walker (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 14-15.

⁹² PCS, “Proposal to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund,” August 1975, folder 4991, box 829, RG 3.1, RBF.

⁹³ PCS, “Project Black Land,” 21 June 1971, folder 4986, box 828, RG 3.1, RBF.

called on African American business interests to embrace a social mission that linked participation in capitalist enterprise to racial empowerment, noting that it was “essential that the black business community, as a collection of *institutions*, begin to make itself felt in the black community as a whole.”⁹⁴

Emphasizing the political imperative of landed enterprise, however, did not preclude criticism of a southern economy that had failed to distribute wealth equally across racial lines. Indeed, Penn Community Services’ entrepreneurial ethos can be read as an implicit challenge to the region’s widespread dependence on low-wage labor. It was not, as Penn Community Services put it:

simply a matter of creating a few hundred jobs; rather, it is a matter of finding a way to develop viable economic communities so that black businessmen, entrepreneurs, and institutional managers compete on an equal footing with their white counterparts in controlling available resources, so that the legitimate aspirations of black people might begin to be realized.⁹⁵

That said, land-based development was not seen as a means to fully overturn the old economic order, either. Rather than fundamentally transforming the relationship between land, capital and labor in the rural South, organizations such as Black Land Services and the ELF sought, first and foremost, to revise African Americans’ place *within* that economic order. To realize the promise of democratic capitalism, they argued, African Americans had to be afforded the same kinds of access to capital and expertise necessary to participate in, rather than be exploited by, southern development.

As such, grand visions of black enterprise zones had initially to take a backseat to rearguard strategies aimed at stemming the ongoing tide of black land loss. Throughout

⁹⁴ PCS, “Economic Development,” folder 4986, box 828, RG 3.1, RBF.

⁹⁵ PCS, “Economic Development: Summary of an Emerging Framework for a Program,” 16 September 1971, folder 4986, box 828, RG 3.1, RBF.

the 1970s, rural development workers centered a range of equity retention efforts that could be characterized, in Black Land Services' terms, as "by any legal means necessary."⁹⁶ First and foremost, black land institutions elaborated a largely technocratic set of solutions that emphasized the dissemination of education and legal knowledge to rural communities. As the ELF argued, there was a profound need "for the general citizenry to be knowledgeable of their rights as a first line of defense against the involuntary loss of their land."⁹⁷ The establishment of the ELF's "county contact" system was one way of nurturing property knowledge in the rural South. First established in Mississippi, the system was comprised of an informal network of Fund associates who were tasked with keeping track of property sale notices in local newspapers and inspecting public documents to ascertain whether black-owned land was being put up for sale under legitimate pretenses. By the end of the 1970s, this network had spread to over sixty different counties in Mississippi and Alabama.⁹⁸ A second line in the defense of African American land was a small, but growing cohort of lawyers conversant in the underlying legal dynamics of dispossession. As Robert Browne recalled, land retention efforts "stimulated a number of black law students into focusing their attention on real estate and tax law, fields which had hitherto been grossly neglected by black law students in the South."⁹⁹ Publications were also designed to translate esoteric legal conventions into accessible advice. In the early 1970s, Penn Community Services published *Got Land Problems?*, a document that explained, in plain language, a variety of the most common

⁹⁶ PCS, "Report of Preliminary Assessment Evaluation and Study of Penn Community Services, Inc.," 26 October 1976, folder 4992, box 829, RG 3.1, RBF.

⁹⁷ ELF, "Legal Documents Preparation: A Proposal for Grant Assistance," 28 March 1975, folder 1948, box 315, RG 3.1, RBF.

⁹⁸ Brooks, "The Emergency Land Fund," 127.

⁹⁹ Browne, "The African American as Scholar, Economist and Activist," 57.

issues facing rural landowners.¹⁰⁰

For all the emphasis on the material and legal dimensions of black land loss, a further component of the black southern strategy addressed itself to the ideological roots of the Sunbelt political economy. Increasingly, the ELF deployed a neo-populist language of productivity in an attempt—at least at the level of discourse—to align black development work with a widely held belief in business and commercial enterprise as a source of civic good and moral health.¹⁰¹ When Randolph Blackwell stated his concerns that African Americans were “becoming a consuming race rather than a producer race,” he was framing Black Power politics in the South as an entrepreneurial alternative to state-sponsored welfare policies.¹⁰² One ELF report went further still:

Marketability of land titles is a prerequisite to effective land use. Use is a prerequisite to effective productivity. Productivity will increase the value as well as the profits of the land. Increased profits and value will increase the status and credit-worthiness of the landowners. Productive land signals a productive people.¹⁰³

In many respects, the above assertion captured the ideological labor at the heart of the black southern strategy. Relying on a claim of development-led racial transformation, proponents were forced to innovate discursive solutions capable of circumventing the contested nature, as one organization noted, of “Efforts to bring the black community into the economic mainstream of American life.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ PCS, “Got Land Problems,” folder 4989, box 829, RG 3.1, RBF.

¹⁰¹ On the ethos of productivity in American culture, see Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (1995, reprinted Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Shane Hamilton, *Trucking Country: The Road To America’s Wal-Mart Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁰² Blackwell, quoted in William Raspberry, “New Towns and Old, Black Communities,” *Washington Post*, 14 June 1974.

¹⁰³ ELF, “The Impact of Heir Property,” 5.

¹⁰⁴ PCS, “Economic Development: Summary of an Emerging Framework.”

Another guiding assumption—that collective land ownership worked to forestall the possibility of black economic development in the rural South—was a more problematic issue. Despite the early emphasis on the exploitative, quasi-legal dimensions of black land loss, the research generated by the ELF during the 1970s also identified a more intractable set of problems rooted in the so-called “non-rational” landholding culture of rural black communities. As Michael Figures’ report noted, “Another reason for land loss by black people,” was “the failure and often times refusal of older black land owners to write wills ... A pervasive superstition among many older rural black people is that if they write a will it is at that point they will die.”¹⁰⁵ Though this assertion was initially based only on anecdotal observation, Figures’ observation was suggestive of both a larger empirical reality, and evidence for a set of cultural assumptions that ELF workers carried with them into the task of black land preservation.

Later research conducted by the ELF, however, found that only six percent of black landownership in the South was formally devised through a will.¹⁰⁶ In the South Carolina Sea Islands, Penn Community Services observed that legal landholders frequently died “without writing a will that devises the real property to someone.” Although South Carolina law stated that in such instances property should pass immediately to legal heirs, “rarely ... is the property partitioned by the heirs nor do the heirs go into probate court to list themselves as such.” In such instances, Penn Community Services argued, “The land is tied up [without a formal owner] and cannot be developed. Nor can persons have an interest in it and are living on the land borrow money against it to improve it.” Moreover, the ELF argued that the legal basis of

¹⁰⁵ Figures, “Final Report,” in BEREC, *Only Six Million Acres*, B1-B19.

¹⁰⁶ ELF, “Impact of Heir Property,” 68.

collective ownership practices were undermined by an increasingly mobile and dispersed black population that was often alienated—in geographical, social and legal terms—from the property they held partial claims to.

As the ELF and Black Land Services had thus discovered, “intestate property”—land often collectively held and worked but legally owned by no-one—had become a major, if not *the* major factor, in the decline of African American-held land. In fact, the issue became increasingly central to the efforts of the organization, leading by 1980 to the publication of a five hundred and sixty-nine page government-sponsored report, “The Impact of Heir Property on Black Rural Land Tenure in the Southeastern Region of the United States.”¹⁰⁷ Summarizing the collective conclusion of nearly a decade worth of practical experience and research, the study stated that “owners” of intestate property were “unable to reap the full benefits of land ownership. Their property cannot be easily sold or mortgaged ... as a result, utilization and productivity of the land are greatly curtailed.”¹⁰⁸ The report also emphasized the pervasive problem of “remote claims”—the possibility of any person with a legal share in a particular property to realize the value of their stake meant that credit institutions (including the federal government) would be unwilling to provide loans for the purpose of economic development.¹⁰⁹

NEW COMMUNITIES: FROM BLACK LAND TO BLACK AGRIBUSINESS

Finally, the question of land use still remained. As the ELF and Black Land Services representatives quickly realized, most African Americans farmers did not have enough access to capital or land to make agricultural production a viable enterprise. As

¹⁰⁷ ELF, “Impact of Heir Property.”

¹⁰⁸ ELF, “Impact of Heir Property,” 1.

¹⁰⁹ ELF, “Impact of Heir Property,” 10.

Joseph Brooks argued, many small farmers' land was "not economical and therefore serve[d] as the root cause of the land retention problems ELF will face."¹¹⁰ Dedicating himself to this issue, Brooks could often be found hard at work expanding what he called a "Great Map of the South." As a 1974 *Southern Exposure* profile noted, the walls of the ELF office in Atlanta were replete with maps of the rural South where, "Over each parcel of black-owned land, he is superimposing a visionary development plan of what could be—from farm federations to playgrounds for the rich."¹¹¹ As the "great map" revealed, the ELF sought to locate potential geographic confluences between black land and regional centers of economic growth. Moreover, Brooks had begun to consider rural industrialization as a viable source of racial empowerment, and did not merely equate black rural enterprise with farming. As he admitted, "I'm not tied to agriculture. I'm for the best and highest use of the land."¹¹² Restating this increasingly central aspect of the black southern strategy, Randolph Blackwell told the *Washington Post* in 1974 that rural development workers were not trying to keep African Americans "down on the farm'...but we are showing them that they don't have to leave."¹¹³

The answer to such questions, however, was inextricably bound to the organization of the rural South's political economy. Sober observers had long harbored doubts about African American farmers' long-term sustainability. As Tuskegee Institute Professor of Horticulture (and former student of George Washington Carver) B.D. Mayberry told *Black Enterprise* in 1973, "Farming is a business...and it has to be treated

¹¹⁰ Joseph P. Brooks to ELF Staff, "Memo on Jackson Mississippi Discussion Document," 26 October 1972, ELF.

¹¹¹ "Black Land Loss: 6,000,0000 Acres and Fading Fast," *Southern Exposure* 2:3/4 (1974), 109.

¹¹² Joseph Brooks, quoted in "Black Land Loss," *Southern Exposure*, 109.

¹¹³ Blackwell, quoted in Raspberry, "New Towns."

as a business if you're going to make money on it."¹¹⁴ Such an assessment was supported by a number of contemporary studies, which defined "family farms" as significantly larger, and with far greater capital investments, than the average black farm in the South.¹¹⁵ Nor could the state's role in agricultural policy be ignored. Most notably, a longstanding drift toward corporate-dominated agricultural production had been further intensified during the 1970s, when USDA head Earl Butz informed farmers that they had to adjust—in his words, "adapt or die"—to new, export oriented forms of largescale agricultural production.¹¹⁶

Latent tensions in the ELF's efforts to develop viable forms of black agribusiness, however, emerged through their engagement with New Communities, Inc (NCI). New Communities—an agricultural cooperative established on over 5,000 acres of land in southwest Georgia—represented one example of the kinds of political experimentation that occurred in the South in the aftermath of the civil rights movement. In Lee County, a local African American real estate agent named Slater King acquired—with financial assistance from the National Sharecroppers Fund—an option to the title of a local 4,800 acre farm. There, he would attempt to build a farming enterprise that one report deemed, skeptically, a "sharecroppers city." Though initially attracting little attention, New Communities' acquisition of a ninety-eight thousand dollar grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity in the fall of 1969 forced the nascent effort into the public spotlight. As the Albany *Herald* reported, "If established, the 'city' would apparently be a

¹¹⁴ "Black Farming in the Age of Agri-Business," *Black Enterprise* (August 1973), 20.

¹¹⁵ Department of Commerce, *Land and Minority Enterprise: The Crisis and the Opportunity* (Washington, DC, 1976), 8.

¹¹⁶ Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), 52.

sort of sharecroppers town, established by the government, with primarily black administration, and presumably primarily black citizens.”¹¹⁷ Indulging in far greater hyperbole, Georgia Governor Lester Maddox declared that New Communities was “wrong, wrong ... They are seeking to tear down state government through the use of OEO money to bums, white and black.”¹¹⁸ Adding his voice to a chorus of disapproval emanating from the white political class, Representative Maston O’Neal of Georgia’s Second District argued that “this is an impractical dream of social idealists, a stupid boondoggle and another waste of tax money.”¹¹⁹

Despite the powerful tide of resistance to the project, New Communities had—at least on paper—gained a measure of support from the broader liberal anti-poverty community, particularly evident in the form of the Ford Foundation. The relationship did not begin auspiciously, however. As George Esser, former head of the North Carolina Fund, reported to Ford in 1970, New Communities’ books were in disarray, the organization was in desperate need of additional resources, and was surrounded by local hostility. In Esser’s estimation the new manager, civil-rights veteran Charles Sherrod (who had taken over from King following his death in a car crash in 1969), was “a dedicated community organizer but a very poor businessman.” Fellow Ford employee Bryant George—an African American who had previously served on the boards of both the United Presbyterian Church and the Delta Ministry—echoed this characterization, describing Sherrod as a “saint” living a “semi-monastic life,” yet a man whose work

¹¹⁷ “‘Sharecropper City’ in Lee Backed by Federal Funds,” *Albany Herald*, n.d., 1969.

¹¹⁸ “O’Neal Brands Lee Project ‘Stupid Boondoggle, Waste,’” *Albany Herald*, 12 November 1969.

¹¹⁹ A rough overview of the early history of New Communities can be found in George H. Esser to Roger Wilkins, 31 August 1970, box 16, Gorge Esser Papers (hereafter GEP).

“gave no evidence of understanding or even being interested in management.”¹²⁰ In sum, Esser informed his colleagues at Ford that “The easiest thing to conclude is that the situation is hopeless. But these are fine, dedicated people who have been working desperately against all odds and a hostile community for a dream. What they have accomplished in getting the crops in the ground and to the present stage should not be understated.”¹²¹ George, in addition, admitted that there was indeed “potential ... for a major demonstration of a new community ... basing its development on poor lowskilled blue collar blacks,” but its success would depend firstly on a change in leadership at New Communities, as well as an “overall plan for development” and “agreement from all possible funding sources about how to respond to the needs and desires of this community.”¹²²

New Communities was attempting, at least as envisioned by the members of its Executive Board, to provide a place for displaced agricultural workers in the quickly changing political economy of the rural South. As the organization wrote in a fund-raising memo, “There are too few viable alternatives for poor folk in our region. New Communities is one of these precious few. Our past efforts are becoming energized in new and bold perspectives by those who see themselves on the land.”¹²³ To that end, NCI began working to develop an extensive vegetable farming operation on its land. Having gained an interest from Southern Frozen Foods, NCI believed that their endeavor represented “an essential part of the development of NCO as an independent economic unit.” In a report that NCI produced in consultation with C. L. Ellison, the Dean of the

¹²⁰ Bryant George to Wilkins, 9 November 1970, box 16, GEP.

¹²¹ George Esser to Roger Wilkins, 31 August 1970, box 16, GEP.

¹²² Bryant George to Roger Wilkins, 9 November 1970, box 16, GEP.

¹²³ “Memo A,” 13 August 1970, box 16, GEP.

Department of Agriculture at Fort Valley College, NCI stated that their long-range outlook included “the possible tripling [sic] of our vegetable acreage and the development of our own processing plant with an NCI label. Vegetable production means more intensive use, and, therefore, more intensive returns from the land. It also means more jobs which will bring more people to the land.”¹²⁴

Early backers, which eventually included the Emergency Land Fund, seemed to agree with—or at least were willing to support—the optimism of NCI. In a report prepared for a Ford Foundation meeting in January 1971, executives argued that “NCI is important for several reasons,” particularly as there was “a desperate need for “a significant Southern, rural, model of a successful community development.”¹²⁵ For Ford, New Communities offered the potential to “help to curb that urban-economic myth that farming cannot be a major part of the economic development of a minority community in this country,” and offer an alternative to what they termed a “national preoccupation with highly industrialized industries.”¹²⁶ Moreover, Ford executives argued that “the South represents the only section of the country where it is presently possible for black people to develop an economic development program and concepts of ownership of land, political control of a governmental unit, coupled with a socially intra-directed community effort which presents real alternatives to people from the area.” This transition from an urban focus was significant. As Joseph Brooks told *Black Enterprise* in 1973, “it is

¹²⁴ “1971 Agricultural Program--New Communities, Incorporated,” box 16, GEP.

¹²⁵ As Karen Ferguson has argued, much of Ford’s work in the era of riots and the “urban crisis” was focused finding ways to manage the incorporation of rural to urban migrants into the changing political economy of the urban North in an attempt to forestall social disorder. Karen Ferguson, *Top-Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of American Liberalism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 23-86.

¹²⁶ “Report Prepared for Ford Foundation Meeting on New Communities, Inc.,” 29 January 1971, box 16, GEP.

significant that church and private foundations are supporting a rural agricultural project ... groups that have spent themselves investing in the urban crisis are looking at the South as the seedbin for their ‘involvement projects.’”¹²⁷

Yet early ELF reports on New Communities were hesitant, noting “the tremendous operational and management difficulties” of the project, as well as its “voracious” financial needs.¹²⁸ Though Browne had visited the project as early as 1970, ELF’s formal involvement with NCI began, tentatively, in 1972, when the organization was discussed extensively at an ELF staff meeting in Jackson, Mississippi.¹²⁹ As Michael Figures reported in a memo, “the idea of the Emergency Land Fund intervening as a ‘trustee’ title holder ... is most attractive.” For Figures, however, the designation of “trustee”—one which required no initial financial outlay on the part of the ELF—would place the organization on an uneasy legal footing, particularly with regard to payment of taxes, mortgage responsibilities and other expenses related to land-ownership. As Figures noted, “the ELF would have no recourse” if the Executive Board of New Communities ran into trouble. As Daniel Mitchell and Jesse Morris had argued in the Jackson meeting, it was preferable that if the ELF was to involve itself with New Communities, it would be in the capacity of assuming full responsibility for the success and financing of the project, a position which neither Figures or other members of ELF staff were convinced the organization had the ability to assume.¹³⁰

By 1973, however, the ELF was able to offer funding to NCI through a grant of

¹²⁷ Joseph Brooks, quoted in “Farm Coops: Embattled Training Ground for a New Breed of Managers,” *Black Enterprise* 4:1 (Aug., 1973), 28.

¹²⁸ BEREC, *Only Six Million Acres*, 10.

¹²⁹ Browne to Jesse Morris, 11 June 1970, ELF.

¹³⁰ “Michael Figures to Directors and Staff of Emergency Land Fund,” 1 November 1972, ELF.

fifty thousand dollars for “charitable and education purposes ... [to] lessen the pressure on low income families.” New Communities, Joseph Brooks wrote, “constitutes the type of new and experimental model for rural development which the Emergency Land Fund wishes to encourage.”¹³¹ By 1974, however, the idealism present at the inception of the New Communities experiment collided with the harsh realities of labor conflict. As *El Malcriado*, the newspaper of the United Farm Workers (UFW) reported, on August 19th over fifty of the co-operatives’ employees—many of them under the age of sixteen—had downed tools in a protest over low pay, unsafe working conditions, arduous management practices and issued related to arbitrary, compulsory overtime. On August 19th, the New Communities workers affiliated with the UFW, and began a strike that would last until well into the next year.¹³² As the workers wrote, “We wrongly believed ... that NCI’s bylaws and dream rhetoric of the late 60’s would defend once and for all our claim to be fairly treated and participate as equals in democratic-decision-making processes.” “New Communities,” they proclaimed, “is not the dream of cooperative agriculture, it is plantation-style cooperation in anti-human exploitation.”¹³³

Perhaps unbeknownst to them, however, the striking workers had revealed the limits of universalist, developmental solutions to manage the effects of a racially-inflected agricultural revolution on black southerners. Much to the dismay of the striking workers, the ELF did not withdraw its support of the NCI board. Instead, it voted to continue its financial backing, which would be conditional on the resolution of the labor-management conflict in a “manner mutually satisfactory to both parties.”¹³⁴ The ELF’s

¹³¹ “Joseph Brooks to Linda Youngblood,” 26 February 1973, ELF.

¹³² “Children Farm Workers Strike Black Co-Op,” *El Malcriado*, 28 September 1974.

¹³³ New Communities Workers to Various, 13 September 1974, ELF.

¹³⁴ Joseph P. Brooks to Harry Bowie, 8 May 1975, ELF.

refusal to intervene on the behalf of the striking workers made the organization complicit, in the eyes of one particular staffer, in the exploitation of black labor. In an open letter of resignation addressed to Robert Browne, Robert Johnson, an ELF Alabama field coordinator and former worker at New Communities, launched a broadside arguing that the work of the ELF was tantamount to a rural pacification program for subduing a potentially revolutionary class.¹³⁵

For Johnson, the strike at New Communities had revealed the limits of the ELF's quixotic pursuit of land as a basis for nation-building that, as he saw it, recapitulated the exploitation of a "rural underclass" of low-wage black workers at the expense of the concerns of a relatively small group of quasi-middle class black landowners. For Johnson, "Striking workers at New Communities are representatives of cruelly exploited, forgotten, marginal, and often nomadic thousands who form the core of the rural dispossessed." Rather than working to alleviate the poverty and exploitation of this class, however, Johnson argued that the Executive Board of NCI was hewing to a "strict capitalist course while pretending to follow a cooperative path of agricultural development."¹³⁶ "Has our land salvaging effort tended," Johnson wondered, "to widen or narrow the economic margin between the landless black and the black landowner? Has our program favored the well-educated, relatively better-off black landowner over and against his poorer, illiterate, or poorly-educated counterpart?" Identifying what he saw as a petty-bourgeois politics designed to primarily benefit property owners, "Are we not,"

¹³⁵ This observation was in line with the work of the African American journalist Samuel Yette, who argued that Community Action Programs that ostensibly "pledged 'maximum feasible participation' of the Black and poor in local decision-making ... actually became a name taking web that helped identify and isolate the natural leaders of every black community in America." See Samuel Yette, *The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), 40.

¹³⁶ Robert Johnson, "An Open Letter to Robert S. Browne," June 30, 1975, ELF.

Johnson asked of Browne, simply “providing loans or business opportunities for the farm income schemes of ambitious black landowners bent on capitalism and individualism?”¹³⁷

Reviving the debates of the late 1960s, Johnson’s critique pinpointed the ways “capitalism” and “economic development” were themselves perceived—at least in one strand of post-civil rights radicalism—as diametrically opposed concepts. As Johnson argued, “How can ELF speak so eloquently about development and economic opportunities for the rural underclass when in practice ELF has turned its back on them?” In Johnson’s mind, the ELF’s refusal to back the New Community workers revealed the power of foundation dollars to sway the course of the movement for black empowerment. As Johnson argued in his letter, he believed that the ELF’s inaction was motivated by a fear of incurring the disapproval of Tom Wahman at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, a man who exercised “an almost unbelievable influence over many so-called rural development organizations.”¹³⁸ The veracity of Johnson’s charges were, for the most part, not fully answered by those at the helm of the ELF. The organization’s response, for the most part, dwelt only on the procedural aspects of Johnson’s criticisms, reiterating that as a 501c organization, could not act “politically,” even if they wished to. Unwilling to become directly involved on one side or the other, the ELF observed that negotiations had reached an “impasse” because of fundamental disagreements over the ideal relationship between the NCI Board and the workers.¹³⁹

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BLACK LANDOWNERS

¹³⁷ Johnson, “An Open Letter.”

¹³⁸ Johnson, “An Open Letter.”

¹³⁹ Harry Bowie to Joseph P. Brooks, 16 July 1975, ELF.

By the mid-1970s, ELF staffers had begun to partially shift course; no longer arguing solely that land ownership could be reduced to a single—albeit critical—factor in development efforts, the ELF maintained that politically conscious landholders could serve as a vanguard of black political power. This drew on older ideas about the role of land in African American life. As Browne argued in 1975:

In the rural South, studies have indicated that land ownership by blacks tends to be highly correlated with characteristics which are generally regarded as worthy of encouragement within the black community. Land owning blacks have proved to be more likely to register and vote, more likely to participate in civil rights actions and more likely to run for office than are non-landowners. In effect, land ownership in the rural South confers upon blacks a measure of independence, of security and dignity and perhaps even of power, which is of crucial importance to the elevation of the status of the black community.¹⁴⁰

Yet as Browne's argument showed, political calculations were never separate from moral arguments that pre-supposed a positive relationship between land and an amorphously defined "black communal health." As Browne had argued earlier, "The 1 million blacks whose families are farm operators ... are of an importance far beyond their number ... because as owners of most of the land to which the black community has title, they are of considerable strategic and psychological importance to the concept of the 'black community.'" Continuing, Browne argued that such men and women were the "producers of mankind's most basic commodities, so their situation is critical to the overall development of a national black community."¹⁴¹ This basic point was articulated again and again by those that came within the orbit of the ELF. As Penn Community Services wrote in their "Black Land Project" proposal, land ownership "provides a sense of

¹⁴⁰ Browne, "The Role of Land in the Development of Southern Rural Black Communities," May 1975, folder 6, box 23, RSB.

¹⁴¹ Robert S. Browne, "Economic Development of Southern Black Communities," folder 32, box 22, RSB.

community and stability in a highly mobile and complex society,” while home ownership endowed African Americans with a “certain pride and a sense of worth.”¹⁴²

In short order, these arguments found practical application. In 1976, the ELF assisted in organizing a minority landowners conference that led to the formation of the National Association of Black Landowners (NABL). Attended by over 150 black landholders who owned, collectively, in excess of 10,000 acres of land, the conference was held, appropriately, at Tuskegee University in Alabama.¹⁴³ In his opening remarks, Michael Figures informed attendees that “It is you who must utilize the land, make it productive, put the idle acres into use, who must teach our children the value of land—you must take the lead—you are the land-owners.”¹⁴⁴ Figures’ entreaty—which was well received by Browne—suggested that the primary goals of the ELF had coalesced around finding ways to institutionalize black landholders as a self-conscious class, capable of collectively exerting political power for the overall benefit of rural African Americans. As Figures argued in his speech, “if black landowners throughout the South would come together ... The collective voice it would provide through strong leadership could not be ignored by the political establishment.”¹⁴⁵ Much of the rhetorical work of Figures’ remarks at Tuskegee was dedicated to convincing the landowners in attendance of this fact.

As Figures’ argued, African American landholders also had to be encouraged to develop a consciousness that, while cognizant of the threat of white exploitation, was also

¹⁴² Penn Community Services, “Black Land Project Proposal,” ELF.

¹⁴³ Joseph P. Brooks, “The Emergency Land Fund: A Rural Land Retention and Development Model,” in McGee and Boone, eds. *The Rural Black Landowner*, 131.

¹⁴⁴ Michael Figures, “Opening Address—Minority Landowners Conference,” 11 June 1976, ELF.

¹⁴⁵ Figures, “Opening Address.”

attentive to the *responsibilities* of black land-ownership. Indeed, Figures' speech emphasized the need for three central aspects: vigilance, organization and knowledge as preconditions for the formation of a powerful class of black landowners. "Let us ring this Nation's Liberty Bell," Figures intoned, "to the tune of no more retreats on the rights of Black folks—to the tune that we will own land in the Country, that we will develop that land and put our idle acres into production—that we will not be deterred."¹⁴⁶ Advancing a model of political engagement that linked the protection of property rights to communal solidarity, Figures' oratory—and the organization it helped usher in to being—suggests much about where the long trajectory of "Black Manifesto" politics would eventually lead.

CONCLUSION

What had grown out the radicalism of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s had, by the beginning of the 1980s, evolved into a very different type of political engagement. On the one hand, the Emergency Land Fund had successfully drawn attention to a longstanding, structural process that had, over decades, stripped southern black communities of their principal resource: land. As the economic landscape of the rural South changed, African American farmers struggled mightily to protect their livelihoods against the rising tide of hunting ranges, prison complexes, golf courses, private resorts and agri-business. As such, the loss of black land—a potentially significant source of capital—denied African Americans the ability to exploit the supposed benefits of a growth-oriented, pro-enterprise, ostensibly race-neutral Sunbelt South. As Robert S. Browne surmised in 1979, African Americans, the "essential

¹⁴⁶ Figures, "Opening Address."

dilemma of the black community” continued to be that “it finds itself in the midst of a capitalistic society but virtually without capital.”¹⁴⁷

Yet such efforts—consistently underfunded, to be sure—undoubtedly contributed to the birth of a movement toward redress for black farmers discriminated against by the USDA. This was an effort that would culminate, by 1999, in the two billion dollar federal settlement of *Pigford v. Glickman*. The ELF’s focus on the issue of black land loss consolidated the energies, experience, resources and personnel that brought into being a new set of organizations—such as the National Association of Black Landowners—that put black farmers on the road to *Pigford*.

But perhaps this was not the most satisfying conclusion. Reflecting on the 1999 decision, the President of the National Black Farmers Association (NBFA), Tim Boyd, argued that “the settlement is not going to buy them a new farm with new equipment and put them back into business.”¹⁴⁸ Read attentively, it is possible in Boyd’s pessimism to hear echoes of the developmental energies that, over three decades earlier, had collectively advanced the conviction that black land and African American rural life should not be the inevitable casualty of “progress.” For organizations such as the Emergency Land Fund and Black Land Services, justice meant not just posthumous redress, but protecting the right of black landowners to fairly participate in the political economy of the modern agricultural South.

But they were not the only ones. In a variety of ways, the rise of the black cooperative movement should be understood as another institutional solution to the

¹⁴⁷ Robert S. Browne, “Institution Building for Urban Revitalization,” 36.

¹⁴⁸ John Boyd, quoted in “Black Farmers Finally Collect in \$1.2 Billion in Discrimination Case,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 24 October 2013.

myriad problems confronting small-scale farmers and landowners. As a range of agricultural research in the postwar era argued, successful southern farmers were those who had acquired the capital necessary to transition away from labor-intensive operations to mechanization. Black cooperativism emerged as a response to such questions of scale, productivity and profit that had so bedeviled the work of the Emergency Land Fund. In doing so, cooperative proponents sought to bring the promise of the “Green Revolution” to bear on the challenges facing African Americans in the rural South. It is to that subject this study now turns.

CHAPTER 3

Black Power's Green Revolution

Cooperatives, International Development and the Modernization of African American Agriculture

Before boarding a flight in the summer of 1968, an assorted group of civil rights activists, businessmen and members of the liberal anti-poverty community posed, briefly, for a photograph in an airport terminal. At the head of the group was Fay Bennett and Leonard Smith, Executive Director and Field Director, respectively, of the National Sharecroppers Fund (NSF), an organization that had since the 1940s been at the center of efforts to improve the livelihoods of economically marginalized black and white southerners. Alongside Bennett and Smith stood Lewis Black, a representative of the newly-formed Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC), Slater King, an African American real estate developer from southwest Georgia, and the Reverend Charles Sherrod, a civil rights veteran and Director of the Southwest Georgia Project. Rounding out the group was Albert Turner, representing the Southwest Alabama Farmers' Cooperative Association (SWAFCA) and Robert Swann, a public intellectual, pacifist and head of the Institute for Community Economics.¹

Collectively, the group of eight included some of the most important practitioners and patrons of a black-led cooperative movement that, over the next decade, pursued a range of solutions to what one advocate termed the "rural southern dilemma."²

¹ "Israel Offers Insights For Rural Development," *Rural Advance* (Autumn 1968).

² Charles Prejean, "Comprehensive Rural Development Program for the Membership of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in the Rural South," 22 January 1979, p.2, box 87, folder 3, Federation of Southern Cooperatives Papers (hereafter FSC).



Figure 3.1. National Sharecroppers Fund Trip to Israel, 1968.³

Beginning in the early 1960s, this movement sought ways to address the human impact of intensive mechanization in southern agriculture and the longstanding economic marginalization of rural African Americans. In response, cooperative workers emphasized the imperative of organizing small farmers and transient rural laborers into collective agricultural enterprises. By pooling the resources, expertise and labor of rural African Americans, cooperatives were envisioned as democratic, “alternate economic structures.” They would become the railroad station, one longstanding participant argued, that could never leave the community, no matter if “somebody far away decides to pull up the track.”⁴

The impetus for the black cooperative movement, however, cannot be adequately explained by reference to the presence of a longstanding cooperative tradition in black

³ “Rural Advancement Fund, Trip to Israel,” National Sharecroppers Fund Papers (hereafter NSF), Audiovisual Collection.

⁴ FSC/LAF, “25th Anniversary Annual Report, 1967-1992,” (East Point, Georgia), 1. <http://www.federationsotherncoop.com/fschistory/FSC25hist.pdf>, accessed online 17 February 2016.

political thought. It is far too simplistic, this chapter argues, to read the reemergence of cooperative efforts as an enduring commitment to economic solidarity, or as the product of a localized vision of social justice and communitarianism forged in the fires of the Jim Crow South.⁵ Such a static, defensive and essentially reactive framing of cooperative energies elides the proactive, modernizing impulses that coursed through the work of the black cooperative movement. In the late 1960s, various members of the cooperative movement looked far beyond their immediate surrounds for inspiration. Indeed, those gathered at the airport in 1968 were about to embark on a journey of almost six thousand miles to Israel. There, over the course of a two week fact-finding expedition, they would tour the dry, yet verdant countryside in an effort to learn more about the institutions at the heart of the effort: the Jewish National Fund, the Hirastudt, and the “moshav” model of cooperative agricultural development. Speaking for the group on their return, Fay Bennett observed that “the Israeli experience bears considerable relevance to our own work for economic development in the rural South.”⁶

Over the next decade, multiple contingents of African Americans working to establish and develop co-ops in the rural South embarked upon the same trip.⁷ In October of 1968, a second group departed the US for a three-week research tour as guests of the

⁵ As Jessica Gordon Nembhard writes, black cooperativism represents “a theory and practice of economic development within a broad tradition of populism and economic justice.” See Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 18-19; in a similar vein, Clyde Woods has argued for the presence of a “blues tradition of expression” in the rural South rooted in an economic populism. Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London: Verso Books, 1998), 12-24.

⁶ Fay Bennett, “Report of Trip to Israel, June 23-July 7, 1968, To Study Its Land Program and Rural Development,” box 54, National Sharecroppers Fund Papers, Part II (hereafter NSFII).

⁷ “U.S. Black Leaders In Israel To Study the Feasibility of Applying Moshav System to U.S. Rural South,” *JTA*, Mar 29, 1974; accessed online at <http://www.jta.org/1974/03/29/archive/u-s-black-leaders-in-israel-to-study-feasibility-of-applying-moshav-system-to-u-s-rural-south>, 17 February 2016.

Israeli Federation of Labor.⁸ Included were representatives of the Southern Cooperative Development Fund (SCDF) and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, two organizations that, more than any others, would come to represent the institutional heart of the black cooperative movement. By the mid-1970s, this ongoing exchange of technical expertise was enhanced further as Israeli agricultural economists travelled to co-ops throughout the South, offering assistance and guidance to the growing movement. Soon thereafter, a number of black cooperative leaders began pushing for the establishment of Agricultural Cooperative Communities (ACCs) directly patterned on Israeli models of rural development.⁹

Understanding the resonance of Israeli agricultural development requires acknowledging, first and foremost, the commitment of cooperative organizers to restructure independent, often small-scale black farmers into viable, modern enterprises that could, as one proponent claimed in a letter to the President of the Rockefeller Foundation, solve the problem of “an underdeveloped people living in a semi-underdeveloped land.”¹⁰ In Israel’s “unusual institutions,” black leaders in the South found a credible vision of development that suggested the possibility of restructuring the terms of agricultural capitalism in ways that could enhance and build upon—rather than erode—the human resources at the heart of black communal life in the South.¹¹ Critically,

⁸ “Federation of Southern Cooperatives Board of Directors Meeting—Executive Director’s Report,” 10-12 January 1969, FSC.

⁹ These agricultural economists prepared a report: see Shaul Baumann, Yehuda Lowe and Yitzhak Remer, “On the Feasibility of Developing Agricultural Cooperative Communities in Some Southern States of the USA.” At the time of writing, the author has not been able to obtain a copy of this report.

¹⁰ Charles Prejean to Kenneth Thompson, 12 October 1971, FSC.

¹¹ As the historian of the Zionist imaginary S. Ilan Troen has put it, Israeli agricultural settlements “were designed as communities in which an authentic, modern Jewish society would be regenerated. See S. Ilan Troen, *Imagining Zion: Dreams, Designs, and Realities in a Century of Jewish Settlement* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 59.

the institutions of Israeli nation-building offered a persuasive model of rural development. An institutional synthesis of sorts, Israeli *moshavim* combined small farming communities with the benefits of scale, coordination, capital and state-sponsored expertise that had accrued significant profits to agribusiness in the United States. While rejecting the more radical, communitarian aspects of the Israeli settlement (the Kibbutz) as insufficiently market-oriented, cooperatives were envisioned as capitalist-oriented institutional arrangements that could reconcile—and indeed, bridge—community development efforts rooted in earlier civil rights struggles to a larger policy and economic context that favored, incentivized and subsidized large-scale agribusiness at the expense of small producers.¹²

As such, black leaders' embrace of the *moshav* showed the deepening imbrication of domestic black politics with the theory and practice of global development. Indeed, cooperatives themselves were institutions that enjoyed widespread, international recognition as exemplars of rural development in the postcolonial world. As the United Nations asserted in 1954:

Co-operative societies have helped to improve security of tenure of land ... to promote conservation of natural resources; to facilitate land settlement; to foster the all-important growth and spread of technical knowledge for better farming; to secure savings and administer credit ... to improve the marketing of farm products ... They have promoted education ... [and] provided effective training in democracy and self-government.¹³

In the United States, however, agricultural cooperatives had historically been largely synonymous with the prerogatives of agribusiness, while cooperatives geared toward the

¹² On the history of agribusiness, see: Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

¹³ United Nations, *Rural Progress Through Cooperatives: The Place of Cooperative Associations in Agricultural Development*, (New York, NY: United Nations Department of Economic Affairs, 1954), 106.

interests of small farmers remained economically marginal enterprises.¹⁴ Much like federal policy makers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, cooperative workers framed their attempts to build low-income cop-ops using the language of a “balanced urban-rural growth policy.”¹⁵ But unlike such policy-makers, who often equated economic growth in rural areas with industrialization that favored the prerogatives of outside capital, cooperative organizers strove to build institutions capable of transforming black economic possibilities through the revival and modernization of African American farmers.

Thus the cooperative movement would prove, in large part, Black Power’s own version of the “Green Revolution.” Though the term, coined in 1968 by USAID administrator William Gaud, formally refers to the increasing deployment of policies and technologies designed to increase crop yield, it gave name to a broad trajectory of agricultural modernization dating back to the 1930s. As Gaud noted in a speech given before the Society for International Development in Washington, D.C., “New inputs and infrastructure, new attitudes, adequate farm credit, and sound policies—these are the active ingredients of the Green Revolution.”¹⁶ In this regard, the cooperative movement

¹⁴ Ray Marshall and Lamond Godwin, *Cooperatives and Rural Poverty in the South* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

¹⁵ The rural policy agenda was in part established by Richard Nixon’s 1970 State of the Union address, which called for a “balanced growth for America ... What rural America needs most is a new kind of assistance. It needs to be dealt with, not as a separate nation, but as part of an overall growth policy for America. We must create a new rural environment which will not only stem the migration to urban centers, but reverse it. If we seize our growth as a challenge, we can make the 1970’s an historic period when by conscious choice we transformed our land into what we want it to become.” See Richard M. Nixon, “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union,” Jan 22 1970. Accessed online Nov 31, 2014 at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2921>. Building on Nixon’s edict were two key pieces of legislation: the Agriculture Act of 1970 (P.L.91-524) and the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act of 1972 (P.L. 92-419).

¹⁶ William Head, “The Green Revolution: Accomplishments and Apprehensions,” 8 March 1968, <http://www.agbioworld.org/biotech-info/topics/borlaug/borlaug-green.html>, accessed online 21 February 2016.

levied a fundamental test of the Green Revolution's universalizing pretensions. Cooperatives, as FSC noted, "had been tried all over the world and there is evidence enough to show their effectiveness ... [they] have worked in Europe, Asia, Africa, and even in the Americas."¹⁷ The question remained, however: could rural development surmount the racial order of the South? Could it be put to democratic ends? Were technocratic, modernizing solutions to rural poverty capable of offering, as Ernest Neal believed, "hope for the wretched"?

ORIGINS OF BLACK COOPERATIVISM

Writing in 1907, W.E.B. Du Bois identified the outlines of a rich tradition of black economic cooperation that could be traced, he argued, as far back as the African antecedent.¹⁸ Tracing this tradition to the United States, Du Bois noted how efforts to enhance black economic power in collective terms had been historically manifest in the creation of antebellum burial societies, post-emancipation efforts to acquire land, and the growth of mutual-aid and benevolent societies (often connected to black churches) in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ During Reconstruction, Du Bois wrote, "Negroes were ... showing their capacity to organize their labor and apply capital to it."²⁰ In the post-emancipation rural South, everyday cooperatives practices—what one federal researcher in 1902 termed "an unfortunate notion of generosity"—were common. As Jacqueline Jones writes, this was a question of survival as much as it was of "culture." "If black household members pooled their energies to make a good crop, and if communities

¹⁷ "Southern Rural Cooperative Economic Development Position Paper," 71-136, Reel R-1690, Grant Files, Ford Foundation Records (hereafter FF).

¹⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Economic Co-operation Among Negro Americans* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1907), 12-18.

¹⁹ Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 31-47.

²⁰ Du Bois, *Economic Co-operation*, 42.

collectively provided for their own welfare,” Jones notes, “then poverty and oppression ruled out most of the alternative strategies ... Individualism was a luxury that sharecroppers simply could not afford.”²¹

In late nineteenth century, cooperativism took on an increasingly political cast. The decline in profitability of the southern cotton economy created the conditions for the growth of black populist energies. Through participation in the Colored Farmers’ Alliance, the Colored Agricultural Wheels, southern branches of the Knights of Labor and the Colored Farmers’ Union, black populists carved a vibrant political movement from an existing foundation of farmers’ cooperatives and ascendant agricultural progressivism, critiquing the linked power of the plantation regime, white political elites and southern economic boosters.²² Economic populism, however, was not the only collective response to the political economy of the New South. Equally important was the development of cooperative businesses in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries. Even at the “nadir” of black life in America, a range of new strategies for black economic independence emerged, including the establishment of African American owned banks, insurance companies and a range of consumer, producer and credit cooperatives.²³ By the 1920s, Booker T. Washingtonian’s advocacy of black business development had dovetailed with a growing nationalist sentiment that culminated in the Garveyite energies and organizing of the New Negro era.

Thus by the time W.E.B. Du Bois had embraced “economic segregation” as a

²¹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009), 101-102.

²² Omar Ali, *In the Lion’s Mouth: Black Populism in the New South, 1886-1900* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2010).

²³ Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 60-77.

political strategy in the mid-1930s, cooperatives had already been recognized by a wide variety of African Americans as a viable way of organizing black economic life. Though Du Bois admitted his frustration in attempting to convince the NAACP of cooperatives' viability, the underlying logic of black economic solidarity was given new impetus by the Great Depression and the profound racial limits of New Deal reforms, many of which excluded African Americans (particularly in the rural South) from its protections.²⁴ Yet it was in urban areas and among women that saw the greatest efflorescence of cooperative activity during the 1930s. As Jessica Gordon Nembhard has noted, cooperative organizing attempted to address "the needs of people who were left out of the market, who experienced market failure, and who were discriminated against in the market." It also allowed participants to "join together and create their own markets and enterprises."²⁵ There was perhaps nowhere in the United States where the "failure of the market" to guarantee economic security was quite as obvious as in the black rural South, where the task of rebuilding communities on cooperative principles would begin in earnest by the early 1960s.

BUILDING A MOVEMENT

Hired in 1975 by the Ford Foundation to conduct an assessment into the work of the Southern Cooperative Development Foundation, Hugh Price—future head of the National Urban League—wrote glowingly of Albert McKnight Jr., a Catholic priest and the SCDF's pioneering leader. In his final report, Price asserted that "Father McKnight is a towering figure in CDC [Community Development Corporation], Southern

²⁴ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in America* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2006), 25-52.

²⁵ Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 147.

Agricultural, and even international development circles.”²⁶ “A fascinating and complex figure,” Price wrote, McKnight could be most often found “Peering out from behind a desk stacked high with co-op financial reports, loan applications, books, census statistics, and legislation.” Testifying to the breadth of McKnight’s expertise, Price noted that “he is conversant with a remarkable range of subjects, from E. F. Schumacher’s ‘Small is Beautiful’ philosophy and rural economic development to the nitty-gritty of partisan politics. The shelves in his office are lined with economics journals ... and books on money and banking, philosophy, and black politics.”²⁷

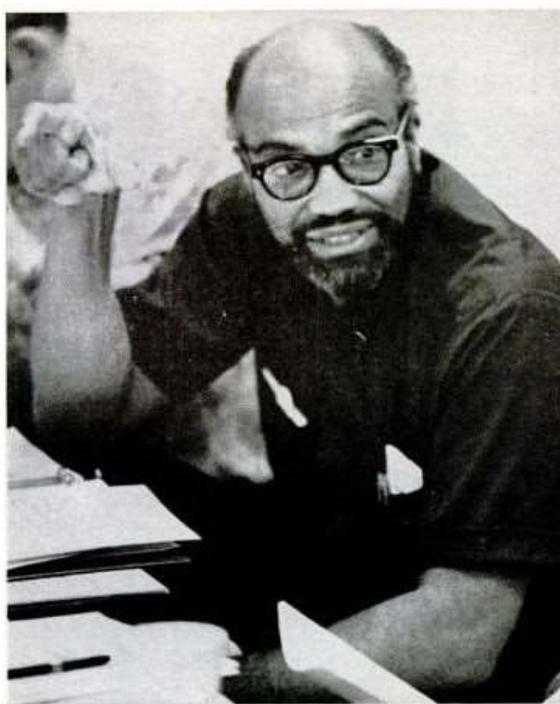


Figure 3.2. Albert McKnight, circa 1971. *Ebony* magazine.²⁸

McKnight’s commitment to the cause of economic development in the rural South

²⁶ Hugh Price, “Changing their Ways to Stay What They Are,” Unpublished Ford Foundation Report, Jan 1976, p. 61, Ford Foundation Unpublished Reports, 004855, FF.

²⁷ Price, “Changing their Ways,” 62.

²⁸ “Closing Ranks on Poverty,” *Ebony* (August 1971), 95.

was in some senses belied by a childhood and adolescence spent in a far different environment. The son of Albert and Althea, McKnight was born in 1927 in Brooklyn, New York, spending his formative years moving back and forth with his family between Harlem and the borough of his birth. Yet despite the frequency of his changes in address, McKnight recalled being raised in a stable, lower middle-class household that remained largely insulated from the Great Depression. As he recalled in his memoirs, he and his three siblings “never missed a meal of lacked the necessities of life.”²⁹ In 1943, at the age of sixteen, McKnight entered the Catholic seminary, enrolling at Holy Ghost Fathers Preparatory School in Cornwall Heights, Pennsylvania. After almost a decade of study, McKnight was ordained as a Priest in June of 1952, performing his first Mass in Brooklyn. Soon thereafter, McKnight journeyed southward to begin his pastoral duties in Louisiana. For four years beginning in 1953, McKnight served as assistant pastor at St. Paul Catholic Church in Lafayette, located in the southwest corner of the state. But with local white residents still fiercely defending racial segregation, McKnight grew restless with the exclusively spiritual aspects of his mission. While in Jim Crow South, the spirit of reform and worldly mission was suffusing the Catholic Church (leading, by 1962, to the Second Vatican Council), this emerging perspective pushed McKnight toward what he termed the “social ministry.”³⁰ Moreover, ministering in Louisiana introduced McKnight to a young native southerner who would go on to become an equally important part of the cooperative movement: Charles Prejean.

Born on May 6, 1941, Prejean hailed from a large creole family, senior members

²⁹ Albert McKnight and Ronnie M. Moore, *Whistling in the Wind: The Autobiography of The Rev. A. J. McKnight, C.S.Sp.* (Opelousas, LA: Southern Development Foundation, 1994), 13.

³⁰ McKnight, *Whistling in the Wind*, 20-23.

of which still worked as sharecroppers in the cotton fields that extended throughout the southwest Louisiana. Though Charles grew up in the relatively urban surrounds of Lafayette, he admitted that in essence, his social vision was “a product of that rural environment and rural way of thinking and viewing reality.”³¹ In recollections of his childhood, Prejean discussed the plight of his grandparents, who spoke creole and little to no English, yet dreamed of owning their own land and carving out a livelihood in rural Louisiana. Their struggles made little sense to the adolescent Charles, who wondered “why it was so difficult for my grandparents and even my father, especially on the farm. It bothered me that they had to work so hard and to enjoy so little from their efforts.”³²

McKnight and Prejean first became acquainted in the mid-1950s; Prejean’s family lived in close proximity to McKnight’s church, where the young Charles had served as an altar-boy from an early age. Even in his formative years, Prejean recalled, McKnight exerted a “tremendous influence on me. He brought ideas from New York. He brought new ideas into the community and in our discussions. He seemed to have a strong conviction toward the improvement of circumstances for black folks in that area.”³³ McKnight, Charles admitted, “accelerated my introduction to the national community and the world community.”³⁴ Leaving home at thirteen, Prejean enrolled at the Saint Augustine Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Affiliated with the Order of the Divine Word, Saint Augustine had been established in 1923 with the goal of increasing black participation in the priesthood. As Prejean noted, he took the step of moving to

³¹ Charles Prejean, “Interview with Robert Korstadt,” (hereafter Prejean interview), 2. <http://dewitt.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/PREJEAN.pdf>, accessed online 17 February 2016.

³² Prejean interview, 7.

³³ Prejean interview, 8.

³⁴ Prejean interview, 8.

Mississippi “because I wanted to serve others.” Much like McKnight, however, he rejected the notion that spiritual life could be decoupled from worldly concerns: “I wanted to serve a community of needs,” Prejean recalled. “I was less interested in being a missionary ... I wanted to return to southwest Louisiana or some rural area and serve there.”³⁵



Figure 3.3. Charles Prejean, circa 1971. *Ebony Magazine*.³⁶

Yet unlike McKnight, Charles would never complete his religious training. Opting instead for a secular mission in life, he entered the University of Southwestern Louisiana, graduating in 1963 with a Bachelors’ degree in French and a minor in History.³⁷

McKnight’s initial exposure to cooperative economics came in the early 1960s, the young priest journeyed to the newly-founded Coady Institute in Nova Scotia.

³⁵ Prejean interview, 5.

³⁶ “Closing Ranks on Poverty,” *Ebony* (August 1971), 94.

³⁷ “Prejean CV,” FSC.

Established in 1959 on the campus of Saint Francis Xavier University, the Institute was named for the Rev. Moses M. Coady, a central figure and historian of the Antigonish movement, whose efforts to enact rural development in Nova Scotia had begun in the 1920s.³⁸ As McKnight wrote in his memoirs, Antigonians were committed to democratic values, but believed first and foremost that social progress was dependent, as he put it, on “qualitative change”—a “conscientization process, whereby, people recognize themselves as knowing subjects with the power to love themselves, feel good about themselves and know that they do have the power to change their external and internal situations.”³⁹ As the Antigonish movement espoused, such a change could not be imposed from the outside; rather, the most valuable education had to be based on a close understanding and identification of what McKnight labelled the “felt needs” of a community.

As McKnight and Prejean soon discovered, these needs—particularly in impoverished black communities in the South—frequently revolved around economic issues. On his return to Louisiana, McKnight focused his efforts on addressing local residents’ inability to borrow money on fair terms. Transplanting one of the major institutional manifestations of the Antigonish movement, McKnight travelled widely across southwestern Louisiana to establish viable credit unions. The basic premise was simple enough. Through the sale of shares—most often at five dollars each—participants pooled their resources, elected a board of directors and assigned a committee to oversee the approval of low interest loans to local residents. McKnight’s work soon became all-

³⁸ For a history of the Antigonish Movement, see Moses M. Coady, *Masters of Their Own Destiny: The Story of the Antigonish Movement of Adult Education Through Economic Cooperation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1939).

³⁹ McKnight, *Whistling in the Wind*, 25.

encompassing, as he travelled “from community to community helping managers balance books, training board members and credit committees, and working with supervisory committees.”⁴⁰ Far from discouraged by the magnitude of the task, McKnight wrote that “In the early days ... we dreamed of ‘changing the face of the South.’”⁴¹

Slowly but surely, the number of cooperative development initiatives in the rural South began to grow. In 1964, McKnight chartered the Southern Consumers Cooperative (SCC) as a way of enhancing the reach and financial power of the extant credit unions. In addition, a number of agricultural, craft and consumer cooperatives had begun to emerge across the region. First among many was the Grand Marie Vegetable Producers Cooperative, established in 1965 by farmers in the Louisiana parishes of St. Landry, Acadia, St. Martin, Evangeline and Lafayette, who felt that they were receiving unfairly low prices for their produce.⁴² In 1966, the Panola Land Buyers Association was formed by tenants evicted from a large plantation in Sumter County, Alabama. With assistance from the NAACP, Tuskegee University and the Alabama Council on Human Relations, forty-four families—who had been denied a loan by the Farmers Home Administration—were attempting to buy a nine-hundred acre tract of land.⁴³ And as important as any organization was the formation of the Southwest Alabama Farmers’ Cooperative Association (SWAFCA), which by early 1967 had over 800 members.⁴⁴

Undoubtedly, such efforts were not without their early problems. As Prejean recalled, certain black business leaders—often those who occupied prominent positions

⁴⁰ McKnight, *Whistling in the Wind*, 26.

⁴¹ McKnight, *Whistling in the Wind*, 25.

⁴² Southern Consumers’ Education Foundation, “Second Annual Report of the Southern Cooperative Development Program,” Reel R-1856, Grant Files, FF.

⁴³ “Panola Land Buyers Association Factsheet,” box 337, folder 2083, RBF.

⁴⁴ George W. Groh, *The Black Migration: The Journey to Urban America* (New York, NY: Weybright and Talley, 1972), 95-100; Marshall and Godwin, *Cooperatives and Rural Poverty*, 46.

within benevolent societies—were often reluctant to support cooperatives or lend resources, for fear of losing their hard-earned status. “They were very traditional and conservative,” Prejean noted.”⁴⁵ That said, a reluctance to participate was by no means the sole preserve of the relatively secure segments of rural communities. McKnight, for instance, was struck by the extent to which participation in credit unions remained relatively low, despite the favorable interest rates available on loans. In part, this state of affairs could be explained by the limited size of the loans on offer. With low membership levels, most credit unions could offer only the most meager of financial resources. As salient in McKnight’s mind, though, were the habits of distrust engendered by longstanding economic precarity. The key, as McKnight noted, was for “people to recognize themselves as knowing subjects with the power ... to change their external and internal situations.”⁴⁶ The average cooperative member, as organizers soon discovered, had a distinct profile. As Prejean explained,

Most of the folks we worked with were extremely poor and subsistence farmers. They lived in rural communities and if they were not engaged directly in agricultural cash crop activities they were doing odd jobs and seasonal work, odd jobs in the nearby county seat or domestic work. They were renting their land in most cases and growing part of their food needs on garden plots ... Poor housing, often no plumbing, minimal formal education.⁴⁷

Such men and women were among the most economically marginalized in the South, yet Prejean remained struck by the enthusiasm cooperative economics often unleashed. People “said amazing things in that period,” Prejean recalled. “Many of the businesses were small ... but folks were attempting to sustain themselves and learn how

⁴⁵ Prejean interview, 16.

⁴⁶ McKnight, *Whistling in the Wind*, 25.

⁴⁷ Prejean interview, 16.

to run their own businesses at the same time and their days were long days. A goodly number of them learned management skills sufficient to run their own businesses with hardly an elementary school education. They became wise policy makers.”⁴⁸ This characterization of the participatory and often transformative nature of the movement was at odds with later external assessments of cooperative organizing, which often emphasized the role more prosperous and educated rural residents played in directing efforts, as well as the “lack of real involvement of the members.”⁴⁹

Not to be deterred, various organizers convened for three days in June, 1966 at the Mount Beulah Training Center in Edwards, Mississippi. Located on the site of a disused college thirty miles west of Jackson, since 1965 Mount Beulah had been used by the Delta Ministry as a training center for a variety of different civil rights organizing efforts.⁵⁰ The conference could be accurately described as an early, southern iteration of what Komozi Woodard has dubbed a “Modern Black Convention Movement” that, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, attempted to articulate a roadmap of racial empowerment and modernity consummate with the political imperatives of the Black Power moment.⁵¹ In the main, the conference provided an opportunity for deliberation on some of the most pressing issues facing low-income black southerners, including the difficulty of selling their produce in an increasingly competitive marketplace, the lack of assistance available to black farmers from federal and state agencies, and the power of resistance to black participation in existing producers’ cooperatives. Charles Prejean recalled that there was

⁴⁸ Prejean interview, 19.

⁴⁹ Ford Foundation, “Little Cooperation on Co-ops,” April 1973, p. 9, Ford Foundation Unpublished Reports, 2207, FF.

⁵⁰ Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 38-39.

⁵¹ Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within A Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), xiii.

consensus on: “the need for more management skills, the need for capital for development and expansion, operational monies, and training.”⁵² In the months following the Beulah conference, a steering committee worked to elaborate a two-year program based on a combination of technical, educational and financial assistance for low-income cooperatives. In addition, it was decided that a new institution should be formed to oversee the process: the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. Chartered in March of 1967, Prejean—then working as general manager of the Southern Consumers Cooperative—was appointed the first head of Federation.⁵³

Before any technocratic solutions were developed, however, the modernizing tendencies of such early efforts were most apparent in how the “problem” of the rural South was defined by cooperative organizers. Lurking below the surface of grassroots organizing efforts was a discourse that defined rural southerners in terms of their distance from Black Power-era modernity. Writing years later for the an article on the cooperative movement published in the *New Republic*, Michael Miles argued that cooperative organizers found rural African Americans “deeply skeptical and fatalistic about the prospects of controlling their own destiny ... But as good conservatives, poor blacks know what they like—some money, enough to eat.”⁵⁴ Such arguments about the “nature” of the rural poor undoubtedly seeped into the rhetoric of rural development work. As one FSC grant proposal argued, “the poor adhere to a fatalism about themselves and a feeling that they have no influence on the events which control their destinies. This has developed out of a generational pattern of complete dependence—for the sustenance of

⁵² Prejean Interview, 22.

⁵³ Ford Foundation, “Little Cooperation on Co-ops,” 9.

⁵⁴ Michael Miles, “Black Cooperatives,” *New Republic*, 21 September 1968.

life, for good name and reputation, and for the right to live—on forces over which they had no control.”⁵⁵

McKnight rarely hid his opinions on this issue, identifying in cooperative economics a solution to rural black culture defined, as he argued, by “a lack of ambition.” “Not only were they helpless, apathetic and listless,” McKnight argued, “their ambitions and dreams had been suffused with despair, emptiness and hostility.”⁵⁶ Thus modernizing black agriculture would produce, in time, a modernization of black consciousness. Elaborating further, McKnight claimed at the 1969 Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit, Michigan that “The new co-operative movement in the South is an attempt to create a black power institution which will help blacks to achieve identity and express their blackness.”⁵⁷ Temporarily deflecting the questions of capitalism and development raised by the NBEDC, McKnight insisted that “the major problem faced by black people in the South ... is just as much a human problem as it is an economic one.” Linking what social scientists would define as “underdevelopment” to the history of slavery and segregation, McKnight maintained that the American “‘caste system’ ... has left its mark of oppression on all of us—that mark of oppression is self-hatred, hating ourselves because we’re black, hating our blackness.” Critically, McKnight defined lingering pejorative perceptions of racial self-worth as fundamentally incompatible with the norms and values of a modern liberal democracy. “A person has to accept himself as he is,” McKnight intoned, “only then will be develop the ability to participate in a

⁵⁵ FSC, “A Proposal: To Research Techniques of Assistance To Grass-Root Cooperative Enterprises in the Southern and Border States, Submitted to the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity,” p. iii, folder 2083, box 337, RBF.

⁵⁶ Albert McKnight, “Remarks at the National Black Economic Development Conference,” folder 5, box 15, Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization Records (hereafter IFCO).

⁵⁷ McKnight, “Remarks.”

common cause, only then will he develop the ability to identify his own interests with the interests of others—in order to enjoy liberty, freedom and equality.”⁵⁸

McKnight’s assertions, in one sense, bore the mark of the anti-colonial revolutionary and psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, who he had read and studied extensively. Where McKnight departed from Fanon, however, was in his advocacy of market-oriented solutions—rather than revolutionary violence—to the problem of black psychological dysfunction. Earlier in his speech, McKnight had acknowledged the influence of the economist Louis Kelso—whose “Two Factor theory” he paraphrased as arguing “for every citizen to be a capitalist.”⁵⁹ Linking Kelso’s work to the rural South and the therapeutic value of employee-owned cooperative enterprise, McKnight argued for a model of capitalist endeavor that centered collective communal advancement rather than a zero-sum game of individualistic competition: “not one individual advancing at the price of stepping on his brother, not just replacing white exploitation with black exploitation of blacks, but that we plan to advance together as a people.”⁶⁰

Furthermore, the emphasis on agricultural modernization dovetailed with the proclivities of the philanthropic establishment who, by the late 1960s, had become one of the critical funders of the black cooperative movement. In particular, the Ford Foundation’s embrace of “social development” had compelled executives—who had played a critical role in the dissemination of the Green Revolution—to address the role of

⁵⁸ McKnight, “Remarks.”

⁵⁹ McKnight, “Remarks.”

⁶⁰ McKnight, “Remarks.” During the 1950s and 1960s, Kelso’s work argued for a major shift in both private and public approaches to creating more progressive forms of wealth distribution and the democratization of capital ownership. In summary, Kelso proposed enhancing American workers’ access to capital as a means of generating wealth, often in the form of employee owned stock. Rather than relying on fiscal policy (principally taxation) to redistribute wealth, workers could become what he termed “capital workers,” holding a material stake in their own productivity.

rural outmigration in the making of the urban crisis. Here, Ford Foundation executives relied on the economists Ray Marshall and Lamond Godwin who, happily, approved of cooperative solutions to rural underdevelopment. Writing in their 1970 publication *Cooperatives and Rural Poverty in the South*, Marshall and Godwin gave intellectual justification to ongoing black efforts. In part, this was because of their adherence to international development norms. As Marshall and Godwin noted, “cooperatives have been important instruments for rural development throughout the world.”⁶¹ Symptomatic of early Foundation optimism was the conclusion made, at a Ford summit in early 1969, that cooperatives represented “Probably the major strategy to be employed to help the 700,000 poor farmers in the south, mostly black, become economically self-sufficient and full-fledged participants in the American economic system.”⁶²

FINANCING DEVELOPMENT

The relationship of nascent black cooperatives to the “American economic system,” however, was uneasy, at best. As Prejean on one occasion lamented, it was troubling in the extent to which many in the vital liberal center believed that African Americans “can only operate shoe shine parlors and barber shops,” adding that “We don’t need Ford’s support for this kind of economic development.”⁶³ This was especially problematic as low-income members could not realistically produce financing for their cooperatives alone. “There are few black cooperatives,” a Ford Foundation report noted in 1973, “where members put up more than 15 per cent of the capital funds.”⁶⁴ Yet the lack of available resources in rural communities was matched by a paucity of funding

⁶¹ Marshall and Godwin, *Cooperatives and Rural Poverty*, 16.

⁶² Hilary S. Feldstein to Mitchell Sviridoff, 11 February 1969, FSC.

⁶³ Charles Prejean to Bryant George, 7 September 1971, 70-311, Reel R-1690, Grant Files, FF.

⁶⁴ Ford Foundation “Little Cooperation on Co-Ops,” 11.

available from other, more conventional sources. As one FSC study noted, local banks in the rural South were uniformly unwilling to provide loans to cooperatives. Nor were prospects much better with enterprise-oriented federal agencies such as the Small Business Administration or the Farmers Home Administration, whose officials, FSC contended, had so far refused to offer much in the way of assistance specifically geared toward the issues facing low income residents of rural communities.⁶⁵

The Federation had thus confronted what was to be an ongoing problem: the difficulty of convincing traditional financial sources that cooperative efforts with links to former civil rights activities serving impoverished communities could in fact be re-evaluated—indeed, translated—into legitimate business “enterprise.” One FSC report put it succinctly:

Poor people ... unlike most persons going into new businesses, are caught in a vicious merry-go-round: they are unable to obtain loan capital because they have no proven history of successful business operation, and they cannot develop this history because they are unable to obtain loan capital. They will require a special boost to ... get off the merry-go-round and onto the economic escalator.⁶⁶

The Federation’s diagnosis, on the one hand, acknowledged an ostensible economic rationale for existing lending practices. On the other hand, it recognized that such a state of affairs could not be disentangled from a pervasive, continuing resistance to black business development in the rural South. Local banks, FSC, were administered by whites who more often than not occupied the apex of local power structures, and had no interest, nor incentive, to assist in the amelioration of longstanding forms of economic and racial inequality. Surmising this situation was a cartoon published in 1971 by FSC artist

⁶⁵ FSC, “Grass-Root Cooperatives and Credit,” folder 2083, box 337, RBFP.

⁶⁶ FSC, “Grass-Root Cooperatives and Credit, II: Capitalization Needs,” folder 2083, box 337, RBFP.

“Aldox,” which noted that “you have to prove you don’t need the money before you can get it.”



Figure 3.4. FSC Cartoon, *The Southern Cooperator*, May-June 1971.⁶⁷

In an attempt to circumvent such systemic and circular hurdles, Ford Foundation executives began to advocate for alternative models of cooperative financing. To this end, Ford assigned Checchi and Company—a Washington D.C. firm specializing in consulting work for socially-oriented parts of the private sector—to produce a report detailing the existing financial requirements of cooperatives, and to lay out plans to “design a development bank which would serve both the cooperative and potential outside investors.”⁶⁸ Checchi’s final report, delivered in May of 1969, reaffirmed much of what was already understood within the cooperative movement. FSC, in the firm’s estimation, was drastically short of the necessary funds to make their particular enterprise model viable. As most cooperatives’ assets had been initially financed through

⁶⁷ Aldox, “In Co-Op Land,” *The Southern Cooperator* (May-June 1971), folder 2085, box 337, RBF.

⁶⁸ Ford Foundation, “Changing their Ways,” 13.

borrowing, the Federation and its constituents had already accrued significant and mounting debts. And as such, FSC was in need of immediate financial relief in the range over one and a half million dollars, with expected capital requirements of roughly ten million dollars over the next five years.⁶⁹ “At this point in the development process,” Checchi’s report noted, “capital, together with supporting technical assistance, is vitally needed. The problem today, however, is that this capital may not be forthcoming because most of the cooperatives have not yet been accepted as borrowers by commercial banks, the Banks for Cooperatives, and other lenders.”⁷⁰

In making this observation, Checchi’s report identified—and implicitly critiqued—the Federation’s distance from the American financial establishment. In order to become viable enterprises, Checchi’s analysts argued, cooperatives had to revise their efforts to secure funding and attempt to lean more heavily on non-governmental sources of investment: “The involvement of the private sector is especially desirable because it can bring the cooperatives into contact with financial intuitions which must be their ultimate source of investment capital.” Finally, Checchi’s report posited that cooperatives were fundamentally out of step with the practices and norms of “sound” enterprise and business management. Obscuring the importance of local economic and political elites’ investments in racial subordination in the rural South, the report argued that the denial of credit at the local level was principally explicable by the “lack of knowledge about the cooperatives due to their recent establishment, their lack of credit standing, and the conservatism of many of these banks.” This “conservatism,” however euphemistically

⁶⁹ Checchi and Company, “Feasibility Study for a Financial Institution Serving Southern Cooperatives,” 2 May 1969, R-1690, Grant Files, FF.

⁷⁰ Checchi and Company, “Feasibility Study.”

put, led the authors to conclude that “responsibility therefore devolves upon the larger banks in urban areas.”⁷¹

Absent the approval of the private sector, the Checchi report called for the creation of an interim solution to the credit woes facing the nascent cooperative movement: a new development bank tasked solely with “the purpose of making loans to low-income cooperatives.”⁷² The notion of a development bank was not new to cooperative organizers; as early as 1968, Charles Prejean had contacted Leslie Dunbar, Executive Director of the rural-oriented Field Foundation, to make preliminary enquiries about the feasibility of such an institution.⁷³ Moreover, Prejean had been advised by Thomas Wahman of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund to seek the expertise of Edward D. Irons, the African American Director of the National Bankers Association (NBA), a conglomerate of black-owned and controlled banks. An expert in the field of black economic development, Irons was Chair of the Department of Business Administration at Howard University and an important scholar in debates on the challenge of economic growth in black communities. As Wahman put it, Irons was uniquely qualified with both “the sensitivity and knowledge to understand the special problems faced by the co-ops.”⁷⁴

The idea that development banks could function as effective engines of economic growth was not, of course, unique to African American efforts. In fact, such institutions had become very much *en vogue* by the late 1960s, the tail-end of a period that saw the establishment of a number of regional models, including the Inter-American

⁷¹ Checchi and Company, “Feasibility Study.”

⁷² Checchi and Company, “Feasibility Study.”

⁷³ Charles Prejean to Leslie Dunbar, 13 June 1968, folder 2083, box 337, RBF.

⁷⁴ Thomas Wahman to Charles Prejean, 28 July 1968, folder 2083, box 337, RBF. See also, Edward D. Irons, “Comment,” *The Review of Black Political Economy* 1:4 (1971), 108-109.

Development Bank (created in 1959), the African Development Bank (1964), and the Asian Development Bank (1966). These institutions, all loosely modeled on the World Bank (1944), were incubators of a central developmental assumption: that financial assistance, skillfully deployed, would stimulate the economic growth necessary to establish political stability in the developing, postcolonial world. Writing in the late 1950s, one technocrat revealed that development banks “held two objectives common to virtually all such institutions: the provision of capital and the provision of enterprise when either of both of those requisites of economic growth are thought to be lacking.”⁷⁵

Rural African Americans’ version—soon to be named the Southern Cooperative Development Fund (SCDF)—would be entrusted to manage and administer what the Ford Foundation identified as the evermore “unpredictable” and “erratic” sources of public and private financing. As Ford put it, “In our estimation the greatest hope for the black cooperatives rests with the creation of an institution which is directly and exclusively responsible for serving their credit requirements and which can assist in developing a corporation of economically successful enterprises around which a viable cooperative movement can grow.”⁷⁶ In turn, it was hoped that loans provided by the SCDF would allow recipients to establish “a financial base and a performance record” that would “graduate” borrowers and make them more able to “draw on the resources of the banking sector and ... become accustomed to commercial borrowing practices.”⁷⁷

This latter aspect was crucial in Foundation executives’ minds. As one report noted, “A

⁷⁵ William Diamond, *Development Banks: A Publication of the Economic Development Institute* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1975), 2.

⁷⁶ Ford Foundation, “SCDF Request for Grant Action,” 18 August 1970, p. 7, quoted in Ford Foundation, “Changing Their Ways.”

⁷⁷ Ford Foundation, “Changing their Ways.”

major concern of our grant has been to get these cooperatives to establish normal relationships with conventional lending institutions that would make loans to cooperatives and, through the co-ops, to individual farmers for land, capital equipment and farm buildings.”⁷⁸

Efforts to bring the cooperative movement out of the financial wilderness continued apace in the early 1970s, a period that Prejean recalled as being dominated as much by innumerable meetings in Washington D.C. and New York City as it was by grassroots organizing. As early as 1967, Ford had begun to fund McKnight’s Southern Consumers Education Foundation (SCEF), the educational arm of the SCC. Armed with a grant of \$578,000, SCC was to expand its efforts beyond its traditional base in Louisiana and organize new cooperatives in Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee. In its proposal, the SCEF had claimed that “Through our own limited experience ... we are convinced that the cooperative movement embodying the self-help motif can make a tremendous contribution to the uplift of the economically depressed people in the south and throughout the world.”⁷⁹ Ford executives’ optimism was somewhat tempered: “We do not know whether cooperatives will ever be a major force in the economic life of the poor,” internal Foundation correspondence noted. “But we believe we ought to see what technical help can do to establish the most favorable conditions for testing the cooperatives’ contributed.”⁸⁰ Building on this early commitment, however, the Ford Foundation began to directly administer grants to the FSC in 1970, matching the over

⁷⁸ Mitchell Siviridoff to McGeorge Bundy, 15 September 1971, Reel R-1690, FF.

⁷⁹ “A Proposal for Cooperative Development Among Low Income Southerners,” Reel R-1856, Grant Files, FF.

⁸⁰ John R. Coleman, “Request for Grant Action,” 11 May 1967, Reel R-1856, Grant Files, FF.

\$600,000 grant that the Federation had already received from the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1969.⁸¹

Aligning cooperatives work with the norms of American business practice also required addressing administrative dysfunction within the movement. As such, much of the early work done by FSC in the late 1960s and early 1970s was focused on establishing sound accounting practice within member cooperatives: as one executive Federation report noted, “Most of our cooperatives’ problems stem from weak financial management.”⁸² Initially, however, efforts to ameliorate this situation involved an accumulation of administrative expertise at the upper levels of the movement. To solve this problem, Ford hired Milton Page away from the Small Business Administration (SBA) to serve as the Federation’s grant monitor. An African American in his late-thirties, Page had graduated from Hampton Institute with a degree in Business Administration and had, since 1967, been working as a Community Liaison Officer for the SBA’s Local Economic Development Program. In addition, Page had begun to lecture widely in the New York City area, from participating in CORE veteran Floyd McKissick’s “Black Economic Seminar” at Columbia University, to leading a discussion for the American Institute of Banking on “Financing Black Business.” As Ford Executive Bryant George wrote, “I believe that what is needed ... is not a person who is all that knowledgeable about cooperatives, but a person who knows business and is in sympathy with people who are starting businesses from scratch. Page is clearly such a man.”⁸³ In

⁸¹ Mitchell Sviridoff to McGeorge Bundy, 24 July 1972, Reel R-1690, Grant Files, FF.

⁸² “FSC Quarterly Board of Directors Meeting,” 23 November 1970, box 337, RBF.

⁸³ Bryant George to Roger Wilkins, 21 August 1970; Hazel E. Carrillo to Milton Page, 24 March 1969; Floyd McKissick to Milton Page, 27 May 1969, Reel R-1690, Grant Files, FF. On the work of the SBA in black business development, see Mary Smith, “Big Boost for Small Business,” *Ebony* (Sep 1968), 76-87.

addition, Martial Mirabeau was hired to work for the SCDF as a loan officer. Mirabeau, whose qualifications included thirteen years' experience at the National Development Bank of Haiti, was seen as an ideal candidate to regulate and rationalize cooperative lending practices. Finally, Ford called on prominent figures in the African American banking community to consult on such crucial appointments. As J.H. Wheeler, President of Mechanics and Farmers Bank in Durham, North Carolina wrote to Ford in his assessment of Mirabeau, "we were impressed with his working knowledge of the requirements for the successful operation of the kind of cooperatives with which he will be working in Louisiana and other parts of the South. His experience with the Development Bank in Haiti appears to have been a thorough one in which most of the groups with which he worked were successful and were able to repay their loans."⁸⁴

In the late 1960s, FSC began a program to train local residents in the art of financial management. As one Federation grant proposal noted pessimistically, often book-keeping, auditing and accounting services were viewed by low income African Americans as "an expenditure which only the economically sophisticated can easily perceive as productive."

⁸⁴ J. H. Wheeler to Talton Ray, 22 May 1970, Reel R-1690, Grant Files, FF.

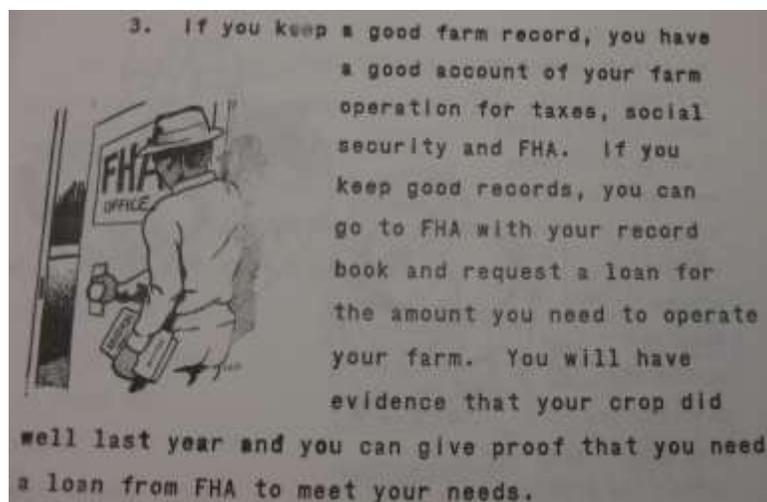


Figure 3.5. FSC Farm Record Book, Late 1960s⁸⁵

To remedy this, the Federation distributed farm record-keeping books to its members, with instructions to “sit down and write all your purchases, expenses and income ... each week.” The handbook informed farmers that keeping such records would enable greater understanding of where and how money was being lost, allow farmers to budget for future planting and, crucially, to enhance farmers’ ability to acquire credit from the Farmers Home Administration.⁸⁶

COMPREHENSIVE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Technocratic solutions to black rural poverty offered only a partial solution to the largest challenge facing cooperative organizers: an agricultural economy increasingly dominated by large-scale farming. Such a situation was no accident of history. Through the establishment of land grant colleges, agricultural experimental stations and the Federal Extension Service between 1862 and 1914, USDA policy makers established the institutional apparatus of modern American agriculture. Black farmers’ ability to draw on

⁸⁵ FSC, “Farm Record Book,” folder 2084, box 337, RBF.

⁸⁶ FSC, “Farm Record Book.”

the expertise and resources of this system was severely limited by a combination of southern racism and, more subtly, federal policy failure. Crucially, black land grant colleges in the South—established by the Morrill Act of 1890—were systematically underfunded by a largely unspoken alliance of hostile state legislatures and indifferent federal bureaucrats.⁸⁷ In addition, the land grant complex consistently emphasized research that advanced the prerogatives of large-scale farming enterprises. As one report published in the early 1970s revealed, in 1969 only 4.8 percent of State Agricultural Experimental Station research could be classified as focusing on “people-oriented” issues such as rural poverty, nutrition and housing. Interest in developing the human capital of rural America was far outweighed by the whopping seventy-five percent of research focused on the development of new farming technologies, marketing efficiencies, crop and livestock protection and biological research.⁸⁸

This ascendant ideology of agricultural progress represented far more than an apolitical positivism; as southern elites of various stripes well understood, it was also a fundamental pillar of Jim Crow capitalism that allowed defenders of the racial status quo to protect their political and economic interests. Limiting the development of an independent black farming class also shored up by a political economy premised on the subordination of low-wage black labor. And as the decline of black farmers intensified, there was the hand of the land grant complex. Between the late 1930s and the 1960s, white farmers and plantation owners eagerly absorbed new technologies of production as

⁸⁷ Numerous pieces of federal legislation, including the Hatch Act (1887), the McIntyre-Stennis Act and the Smith-Lever Act (1914) delegated responsibility for the provision of federal funds to the states. See Jim Hightower, *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times: A Report of the Agribusiness Accountability Project on the Failure of America's Land Grant Complex* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1973), 10-11.

⁸⁸ Hightower, *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times*, 25-26.

southern agriculture shifted from a labor-intensive to capital-intensive farming. Conversely, the number of black-owned farms had fallen precipitously in the postwar years, dropping from 560,000 in 1950 to only 98,000 in 1970. By the late 1960s, black farmers both earned significantly less than white farmers (a median annual income of roughly \$3,000 compared to \$7,000 for whites), and farmed considerably smaller plots of land. Moreover, black farmers had considerably weaker access to the credit and technical assistance that might have been able to sustain their livelihoods.

Cooperative organizers' attempts to address such systemic disadvantages initially evolved in an ad-hoc fashion. In part, this was a result of the immense diversity of initiatives that existed under the umbrella of the FSC. As *Southern Exposure* noted in a profile published in 1974:

The cooperatives vary from membership of twelve people in small handicraft co-ops to 2,000 families engaged in farming over a ten county area. About one-third of the co-ops ... are agricultural marketing and purchasing concerns. The rest include consumer groups and buying clubs, credit unions, a health center, and handicraft, housing and fishing, and light manufacturing co-ops (e.g. sewing, metal stamping, a bakery, building materials).⁸⁹

As such, it was often far from clear who exactly represented the most significant constituents of the movement. Much to the dismay of the Ford Foundation, for instance, FSC insisted on sharing resources among the entirety of its membership, and refused to let any cooperative—no matter how small or economically marginal—flounder. For the time being, survival efforts were accorded the same status as more progressive, market oriented initiatives. The establishment of the Panola Land Buyers Cooperative, for

⁸⁹ "Hard Times and High Hopes: The Federation of Southern Cooperatives," *Southern Exposure* (Vol II No 2-3, Fall 1974), 39-40.

instance, was in large part a rear-guard action designed to protect recent plantation evictees from destitution. By contrast, the Southwest Alabama Farmers' Cooperative was, from its earliest days, a model of agricultural commodity marketing whose backbone was comprised of low-income farmers, many of whom had ties to civil rights organizations. Only a fraction of SWAFCA's members were sharecroppers, and the vast majority either rented or owned their own land. As one board member told the *Southern Courier*, "We are working to save our homes, our farms, our lives."⁹⁰

As such, many of the early goals centered on demonstrating that agricultural cooperatives could be remade as economically viable enterprises. The major aspects of this effort included intensive training for the Federation's field staff in farming practices, financial management and "human development," as well as the establishment of a marketing program to coordinate the sales of crops produced by member co-ops. In addition, the Federation organized an accounting department—including three full time accountants—to train local farmers to effectively keep financial records.⁹¹ The clearest expression of the FSC's desire to assist the remains of a black farming class could be seen in the establishment of an itinerant "Small Farmers School." Conducted in the vicinity of fifteen different FSC cooperatives and attended by 1,285 participants, the training program was designed as a vehicle for membership education that could, ideally, both enhance participation in cooperatives while enhancing the efficiency of small farmers' working lives.⁹²

⁹⁰ Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry it On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964-1972* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 213.

⁹¹ William Busby, "Federation of Southern Cooperatives Report to the Ford Foundation," [N.D.], FSC.

⁹² "Proposal for Small Farmers Training Fall Crop Program, and General Support of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives," [N.D.], FSC.

By the beginning of 1972, these early efforts had an institutional center: a training, research and demonstration farm located on 1,325 acres of land near Epes in Sumter County, Alabama. Equipped with a dormitory to house visiting cooperative members, and a rural resource library and archive, greenhouses and significant teaching and office space, the Epes center functioned as a small-scale replacement for the black land grant colleges, whose efficacy and reach in rural areas was still very much an open question. Implicitly critiquing this failure, Prejean wrote to Field Foundation Director Leslie Dunbar that “Black people, and in our case, rural Black people need their own institutions ... The nature of our historical and present conditions dictate this necessity. We must assess our own situations and determine our own prescriptions.”⁹³ Moreover, the demonstration farm gave black farmers direct experience with growth areas of southern agriculture. In the early 1970s, the Epes center pioneered a cattle ranching program and a range of row-crop production, both of which the Federation hoped to be able to serve as a model enterprises for its constituent cooperatives while allowing for crop diversification that would, they hoped, make black farmers less vulnerable to fluctuations in the price of cotton.⁹⁴

The establishment of the Epes initiative—quickly christened the FSC Rural Research, Training and Demonstration Farming Center—signaled the Federation’s unwavering commitment to the plight of family farms.

⁹³ Charles Prejean to Leslie Dunbar, 20 October 1975, FSC.

⁹⁴ “Federation of Southern Cooperatives 1972 Annual Report,” folder 2088, box 338, RBF; Marshall and Godwin, *Cooperatives and Rural Poverty*, 46.



Fig. 3.6. Row Crop Farming at the FSC Demonstration Farm, Epes, Alabama, early 1970s.⁹⁵

As the Federation's 1975 annual report noted, roughly one third of the organization's membership was engaged in agricultural production. Identifying the "agricultural potential of 10,000 small farmers," the Federation argued that "Small farms can be efficient operations. The inherent size of a farm does not relegate it to inefficiency."⁹⁶ No idle observation, this assertion was deeply heretical, challenging the assumptions underlying over a century of agricultural policy. The FSC report argued that "Utilizing proper production, harvesting and marketing techniques is the key in developing a successful program that will allow small farmers to reach their full potential ... Synchronizing the production, harvesting and marketing functions ... [is] the very essence of what cooperation, i.e., cooperatives, is all about."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ FSC, "Economic Development of the Rural South," folder 2088, box 338, RBF.

⁹⁶ FSC, "Federation of Southern Cooperatives Annual Report, 1974-75," FSC.

⁹⁷ FSC, "Federation of Southern Cooperatives Annual Report, 1974-75."

Drawing attention to the perilous existences of small-scale black farming also required rhetorically re-conceptualizing black farming life as a site of racial progress. Increasingly, the Federation framed black farmers as part of a solution to national, and even international problems. This effort relied, in part, on rhetorical claims that emphasized the role of small farmers in American history. In a letter to Clay Cochran, a rural housing advocate and organizer of a number of Rural America conferences held during the 1970s, Prejean declared that he “would like to see this conference declare small farmers ... a national and natural resource, destined for extinction which should be protected, preserved and encouraged to remain in production.”⁹⁸ While drawing on a certain agrarian romanticism, the FSC was equally concerned to formulate what they termed “a more enlightened national policy” geared toward preserving such rural livelihoods. One such opportunity was afforded by the food crises of the early 1970s. In a talk given as part of the National Science Foundation’s “Science for Citizens” program, Prejean argued that small farmers held the necessary skills to help solve the issue. Prejean’s talk emphasized the value of experiential forms of knowledge and expertise developed over decades by farm families. “Making scientific knowledge and technology available that is adaptable to these farmers,” Prejean argued, “may be a way to address the ‘world’s needs for food and fiber.’” Rather than seeing small farming practices as fundamentally incompatible with agricultural modernization, Prejean argued that small farmers might be more effectively deployed as “ecological engineers” capable of generating a more enlightened, environmentally responsible agriculture.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Charles Prejean to Clay Cochran, Dec 17 1974, FSC.

⁹⁹ Charles Prejean, “The Need for Technology Adapted to the Problems of Small Agricultural Producers,” ELF.

As a developmental project, the black cooperative movement did not rest at protecting the livelihoods of small farmers. Over the course of the 1970s, cooperative organizers elaborated ever-more sophisticated visions of what they termed “comprehensive rural development” that placed small farmers at the center of a broader, regionally-oriented model of economic exchange. Charles Prejean put it simply, noting that he was “interested in building economic structures that will generate income for our people and will flow within our communities in the normal economic manner.”¹⁰⁰ Thus in 1972, Charles Prejean completed what was perhaps the most ambitious, black-authored development proposal in the post-civil rights rural South. The Federation submitted what they termed a “Micro-Regional Economic Developmental Plan” to the Ford Foundation, a document that would eventually contribute to the disintegration of the relationship between the two organizations. In the meantime, the proposal—which requested over three million dollars in funding—laid out a sweeping re-organization of the relationship between the constitutive cooperatives of the FSC. By 1972, the Federation was serving over 110 different cooperatives throughout the South. Prejean proposed that the Ford Foundation provide funding for intensive technical assistance to twelve of these cooperatives, at a cost of roughly six hundred thousand dollars per year. These cooperatives would in turn become centers of knowledge, experience and resources that smaller rural organizations could draw on for assistance, creating a holistic development apparatus that might finally stimulate meaningful economic growth in rural areas. As Prejean put it, “the Federation is working toward the development of ‘agribusiness’—self-sustaining communities throughout the South of fifty to one-hundred thousand

¹⁰⁰ Charles Prejean to Bryant George, 4 August 1971, FSC.

people. These communities will encompass locally-owned, financed, and operated businesses which would provide income, employment, and an opportunity for indigenous individuals to partake in the economic development of their own communities.”¹⁰¹

Prejean’s proposal provides compelling evidence that the cooperative movement had advanced in sophistication far beyond a solely localized and reactive, grassroots effort. First and foremost, the FSC proposal indicated a belief that any solution to the economic problems of rural black farmers could only be solved by reimagining the relationship between black farmers on a regional level. This was the moment when the imperatives of Black Power nation building met the technologies of developmental statecraft. As one FSC document noted, the organization’s goal was to “develop black economic systems ... [including] specialty agricultural, livestock production programs integrated with industrially related economic activities.”¹⁰² Yet it did not entail a rejection of communitarian impulses. In large part, the Federation’s plans indicated the organization’s commitment to a re-theorization of rural development that, as they put it, would be organized “around people and their communities, for their benefit. Rural development cannot be a program for industries to exploit.”¹⁰³ Indeed, the Federation’s plans were an explicit rebuttal to the general trajectory of rural development policy in the early 1970s which—while theoretically instigating a major expansion of federal funding and loans to rural communities—was largely concerned with finding ways to encourage rural industrialization. As Nebraska Senator Carl Curtis asserted during the course of

¹⁰¹ Federation of Southern Cooperatives, “Micro-Regional Economic Developmental Plan and 1971 Report,” p. 15, Grant 70-311, Reel R-1690, Grant Files, FF.

¹⁰² “Agenda for Action: The Technical Advisory Board of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives,” 27 June 1972, folder 2088, box 338, RBF.

¹⁰³ Henry Bellman, quoted in William Busby, “Federation of Southern Cooperatives Report to the Ford Foundation,” [N.D.], FSC.

committee meetings, “Rural development means ... more industry in our small towns and cities in our agricultural areas.” Senator Harry Bellman was just as clear: “A national rural development program must encourage industries to locate their plants in rural areas.”¹⁰⁴

The Federation’s attempts to redefine the terms of rural development were also informed by the changing landscape of political power in the post-civil rights South. In 1973, Prejean—who had recently enrolled in the Doctoral Program in Political Economy in Atlanta University’s Political Science Department—authored a paper for Clark College’s Southern Center for Studies in Public Policy.¹⁰⁵ Entitled “Georgia and Local Government Modernization: The Georgia Area Planning and Development Commissions,” Prejean’s paper identified the importance of regional planning commissions that had, since the late 1950s, exerted considerable influence on patterns of economic growth. Named Area Planning and Development Commissions (APDCs), such institutions had evolved into powerful entities that organized and allocated technical expertise to local government, prepared development studies, held responsibility for acquiring federal funding and were uniquely placed to solicit capital investments from private industry. “These bodies,” Prejean wrote, “make the broad policies, they perform the legal formalities determining what occurs in the region.”¹⁰⁶

They were also, as Prejean recognized, white institutions. APDC boards were directly answerable to local leadership or, as Prejean argued, the “forces of tradition.”

¹⁰⁴ Michael F. Nolan and William D. Heffernan, “The Rural Development Act of 1972: A Skeptical View,” *Rural Sociology* 39:4 (Winter 1974), 537.

¹⁰⁵ “Prejean CV,” FSC.

¹⁰⁶ Charles Prejean, “Georgia and Local Government Modernization: The Georgia Area Planning and Development Commissions,” folder 1447, box 226, RBF.

Rather than serving as vehicles of modernization, he argued, APDCs were hamstrung by resistance from local politicians fearful of ceding power to outside forces. Moreover, black participation in the commissions was unsurprisingly low. Of the 367 total APDC board members in the state, only 21 were African American. Prejean, however, envisioned APDCs as potential sites of productive black policy making and a model for the cooperative movement which continued to struggle with myriad inefficiencies. As Prejean's essay argued, meaningful economic growth could only be possible through the kinds of resource organization that the APDCs represented. Yet they were institutions that a growing black political class had no control over. Indeed, the growth of black political power at the local level, Prejean argued, was out of step with new trends toward broader mechanisms of regional development. As he put it, "it may be possible that these Blacks may be pursuing control of obsolete, inoperative mechanisms."¹⁰⁷

In the meantime, other cooperative organizers had begun to see the logic in more elaborate approaches to rural development. By 1975, Albert McKnight's Southern Development Foundation (SDF)—created in 1972 as a sister organization to the SCDF—had begun to lay the foundations of a series of large-scale agricultural enterprises oriented toward the profit of rural African Americans. As SDF argued in a proposal to the Ford Foundation, "The bulk of cooperatives problems arise from the fact that volume is too low; with small acreages, the co-ops cannot afford to pay wages high enough to keep good employees, they are not able to take advantage of the carious economies of scale in farming and processing, and it is more expensive to market small lots of produce."¹⁰⁸ In

¹⁰⁷ Prejean, "Georgia and Local Government Modernization."

¹⁰⁸ "Proposal to the Ford Foundation from the Southern Development Foundation," Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF.

that sense, McKnight had travelled a long way from grassroots literacy classes in rural Louisiana in the 1950s. By the mid-1970s, his development work was firmly imbricated in the knowledge and practice of the global Green Revolution, which emphasized the need for marshalling capital, technological innovation, technical expertise and the organizational models of large-scale business enterprise as the pillars of agricultural modernization in the Third World.¹⁰⁹

As previously noted, the SCDF—or, as it increasingly became deemed, “the Fund”—was designed as a lending institution to assist cooperatives affiliated with the Federation.¹¹⁰ The two organization’s close working relationship had been fatally undermined in the early 1970s, however, by the intervention of Ford Foundation officials, who encouraged cooperative organizers to narrow the scope of their operations toward a limited number of “test cases” that could more thoroughly demonstrate the viability of black farming. In part, the split was reflective of the Foundation’s anxieties about Prejean himself, whose idealism was increasingly viewed as a liability rather than an asset. For Bryant George, one of the few African American executives working at Ford, the level of funding FSC proposals were calling for was untenable. In a letter to Clark College President (and Ford consultant) Vivian Henderson, George wrote that “To make a long story short, Prejean is a brilliant, enlightened young man but he lacks the ability to perceive reality. Reality is ... nobody in the early 1970s is prepared to support 110 rural black co-operatives ... to the degree that they would have in the 1960s.”¹¹¹ The rejection

¹⁰⁹ As Arturo Escobar has noted of Columbia’s Integrated Rural Development Program (1976-81), the intent was “to bring the green revolution to the small farmers so as to turn them into entrepreneurs in the fashion of commercial farmers, only on a smaller scale.” Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 137.

¹¹⁰ Ford Foundation, “Changing Their Ways,” 14.

¹¹¹ Bryant George to Vivian Henderson, 15 June 1972, 70-311, Reel R-1690, Grant Files, FF.

stung. In a long letter to Mitchell Sviridoff, Vice President of National Affairs at Ford, Prejean pleaded that reducing the level of funding to the FSC would have disastrous consequences, noting that he was confident that a number of cooperatives had demonstrated the potential to become “viable and self-sustaining businesses.”¹¹²

Unbowed by Prejean’s protestations, the Ford Foundation terminated its assistance to the Federation in 1972, citing the organization’s goals as being “simply not consistent with those of the [Ford] Social Development office.”¹¹³ Following suit, the Office of Economic Opportunity ended its support the same year, justifying the decision on the basis of Federation’s refusal to participate in an evaluation which, in the minds of many cooperative organizers, would be itself used to scale back federal funding to the movement.¹¹⁴

In contrast to the recalcitrant Federation, the SCDF was willing to embrace Ford’s edicts and focus their attentions on what McKnight referred to in his memoirs as “concentrated approach to development.”¹¹⁵ Beginning in September of 1973, SCDF redirected their efforts toward five model cooperatives: Grand Marie Vegetable Producers in Sunset, Louisiana, Choctaw County Agricultural Cooperative in Weir, Mississippi, SWAFCA in Selma, Mana Hill Farmers’ Cooperative in Palmetto, Florida, and Santee Production and Marketing Cooperative in Greeleyville, South Carolina.¹¹⁶ These were, in Ford’s estimation, the most “promising” of the southern co-ops that, they hoped, could effectively demonstrate “a model of a cooperative mechanism that works,

¹¹² Prejean to Mitchell Sviridoff, 2 June 1972, 70-311, Reel R-1690, Grant Files, FF.

¹¹³ Eamon Kelly to Charles Prejean, 28 June 1972, folder 2087, box 337, RBF.

¹¹⁴ FSC, “Southern Rural Cooperative Economic Development Position Paper.”

¹¹⁵ McKnight, *Whistling In the Wind*, 68.

¹¹⁶ Southern Development Foundation, “Proposal to the Ford Foundation from the Southern Development Foundation,” n.d., 73-212, Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF.

that increases a farmer's ability to farm, improves his income and his access to the decision making levels of our society.¹¹⁷

BLACK MOSHAVIM

In attempting to forge a modernizing black political praxis in the rural South, cooperative organizers could only call on a handful of relevant domestic models. To that point, successful cooperatives had been the domain of large-scale farmers, whose ability to mobilize capital, land and business expertise had produced numerous successful enterprises, including a number of Fortune 500 companies.¹¹⁸ By contrast, cooperatives designed to enhance the economic power of family farmers had been limited, and often subject to intense political controversy.

Nonetheless, one critical antecedent to the cooperative movement of the 1960s were the New Deal Resettlement Communities. The brainchild of Rexford Tugwell, an Columbia University economist by training and Roosevelt's Undersecretary of Agriculture between 1934 and 1936, the short-lived Resettlement Administration (1935-36) had attempted to relocate farm families working exhausted soils into areas where agriculture could be pursued more productively. One such community—later folded into the black cooperative movement—was Gee's Bend, located in Wilcox County, Alabama. Following a tour of the cooperative farming community during the 1940s, the African American intellectual Sterling Brown observed that he found the community to be “nearly out of the world.”¹¹⁹ In fact, Gee's Bend was very much a product of the ongoing

¹¹⁷ “Request for Grant Action,” 13 March 1973, 73-212, Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF; “Request for Grant Action,” 20 June 1974, 73-212, Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF.

¹¹⁸ Marshall and Godwin, *Cooperatives and Rural Poverty*, 26-27.

¹¹⁹ John Edgar Tidwell and Mark A. Sanders, eds., *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 109.

modernization of the rural South. Nationally, over 25,000 poor people's cooperatives like Gee's Bend were established in the New Deal era. And following the creation of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937, federal policy-makers deepened their commitment to the challenges facing low-income farmers that attempted, amongst other things, to increase small farmers' ability to purchase land. There were decided limits to these efforts, particularly as far as African Americans were concerned. Though much of the FSA's work was concentrated in the rural South, one evaluation found that in 1940 only two thousand black families lived in FSA-sponsored cooperative settlements.¹²⁰ The legacies of this foundational exclusion does much to explain why, by the late 1960s, McKnight and other cooperative organizers had begun to look outside the borders of United States for solutions to the crisis facing African American farmers.

By the late 1960s, however, the rise of Black Power had in part reshaped the conceptual language through which questions of rural empowerment would be framed. Indeed, the future of the African Americans in the rural South had also become enmeshed in a vibrant debate about the possibility of black nation-building. At the National Black Economic Development Conference in 1969, McKnight's speech directly addressed percolating desires, particularly on the part of the Republic of New Afrika, to create an "African" state in the American South. Departing from the supposedly ethnocentric tendencies of Black Power radicalism, however, McKnight chose instead to relay to his audience his recent experiences in Israel, where the Jewish National Fund had been instrumental, he argued, in forging a sense of collective identity rooted in attachment to the land. To rapturous applause, McKnight asserted that if a "black state was "ever to be

¹²⁰ Marshall and Godwin, *Cooperatives and Rural Poverty*, 29-34.

realized, something comparable to the Jewish National Fund must be established—a Black National Fund.”¹²¹

That cooperative leaders such as McKnight did not dismiss Israeli agricultural expertise out of hand is perhaps surprising to modern ears. It is crucial, however, to acknowledge the largely positive reputation of Israel in black public discourse during the late 1960s. In the immediate aftermath of the “Six-Day War,” prominent race leaders—including Martin Luther King and A. Philip Randolph—voiced public support for Israeli actions. In addition, black journals of repute were often decidedly sympathetic to Israeli aspirations in the Middle East. For instance, a Chicago *Defender* editorial in June of 1967 emphasized the oppression of a Jewish people “who have been buffeted, persecuted and humiliated the world over.”¹²² Moreover, the state of Israel’s efforts to “fashion a viable state through sheer preservation of their unconquerable spirit of freedom and independence”—according to the *Defender*—represented not a pattern of settler colonialism but one of “the miracles of the twentieth century.”¹²³

Supportive sentiments toward Israel were at least in part a product of a widespread belief amongst African Americans that black people and Jews shared a unique history of oppression and displacement, an idea that dated at least as far back as Marcus Garvey in African American political thought. A less prominent factor sustaining African Americans’ support for Israel, however, was its ongoing role in the development of sub-Saharan Africa. As the *Defender* informed its readers: “Since it attained nationhood, Israel has gone out of its way to help the newly independent African

¹²¹ McKnight, “Remarks at the National Black Economic Development Conference,” folder 15, box 6, IFCO.

¹²² “The Near East Crisis,” Chicago *Defender*, 7 June 1967.

¹²³ “Shalom to Israel,” Chicago *Daily Defender*, 3 May 1969.

countries in every way possible, to reach their full destiny as sovereign states.”¹²⁴ This observation acknowledged a history dating back to the 1950s, when Israel—excluded from the 1955 Bandung Conference of non-aligned states largely at the behest of Arab nations—sought to strengthen diplomatic ties with newly independent African countries. Over the next ten years, a mutually beneficial relationship between Israel and thirty-three sub-Saharan African countries blossomed. While resources, expertise and technical support gave impetus to African development efforts, new diplomatic ties allowed Israel—at least temporarily—to escape its regional isolation. As one scholar of this largely forgotten history has noted, “A number of African leaders were attracted by unusual Israeli institutions that seemed relevant to their circumstances, especially agricultural cooperatives, the labor movement, and youth organizations.”¹²⁵

Like the leaders of African nations emerging from the shroud of colonialism, cooperative organizers’ interest in Israel was based on the principal role agricultural institutions and expertise had played in shaping Israeli modernity. That was a history that could be traced as far back as the 1880s. In the early stages of Jewish settlement in Palestine, farmers established cooperative agricultural settlements (*moshavoth*), wherein families worked their land independently of one another. Like its cousin the *kibbutz* (a collectivized farming community), the emergence of the *moshav* in the years preceding World War I represented a practical, rather than ideological reformation of Jewish communitarianism. In fact, the return to the land was economically fraught for Jewish

¹²⁴ “The Near East Crisis,” *Chicago Defender*; see also “Israeli Tutelage Boosts Young African Nations,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, 4 December 1967.

¹²⁵ Lawrence P. Frank, “Israel and Africa: the Era of Tachlis,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 26:1 (1988), 151. See also, Fouad Ajami and Martin H. Sours, “Israel and Sub-Saharan Africa: A Study of Interaction,” *African Studies Review* 13:3 (1970), 405-13.

settlers; few had any knowledge of agriculture, and many early moshavoth—attempting to hold to a model of peasant farming unreconstructed by modern agricultural techniques—proved chronically inefficient. The increasing role of zionist planners, agricultural scientists and economists, however, led to a greater emphasis on crop diversification, effective marketing and production efficiencies. By restricting the size of land available to settlers, planners hoped to prevent the necessity of mechanization. But the countervailing aspirations of new immigrants to Palestine from Europe and Africa who were, on the whole, less sympathetic to communitarian values changed Israeli state-builders’ calculus. Increasingly, the market-oriented organization of the moshav was envisioned as a way to balance the right to private ownership with the ideological imperatives of national community building. Indeed, after Israeli independence in 1947, the market-oriented moshav far outstripped the kibbutz as the most dominant form of settlement. As the Israeli economist Yitzhak Elazari-Volcani put it, “The worker of today is the owner of tomorrow.”¹²⁶

Ironically, by the time African American activists and intellectuals began to visit Israel in the late 1960s, the institution of the moshav was itself in something of a crisis. Earlier successes had disguised the extent to which state coercion was required to direct immigrants toward a life of agricultural labor; as one scholar of such “reluctant pioneers” has noted, cooperative principles were often far from fully embraced on the ground.¹²⁷ In addition, rapid increases in immigration to Israel following independence drastically decreased the availability of land to settlers, while the rise of mechanization—much like

¹²⁶ Yitzhak Elazari-Volcani, quoted in S. Ilan Troen, *Imagining Zion*, 40.

¹²⁷ Alex Weingrod, *Reluctant Pioneers: Village Development in Israel* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1972), 131.

in the US—further cut into the need for agricultural labor. As McKnight, Prejean and others began their excursions to the Israeli countryside new, industrialized “development towns” were being established in the Galilee Valley and the Negev desert in an attempt to absorb surplus labor. That said, in 1966 there were 297 moshavim in existence, housing a total population of over 110,000 people.¹²⁸

Arriving in Israel in the summer of 1968, cooperative organizers reasoned that an institution producing four fifths of Israel’s food supply, providing high farm incomes (equivalent to those of Western European nations), while undergirding cultural assimilation and nation-building in a hostile environment might have some relevance for the rural South.¹²⁹ To test this hypothesis, the first delegation met with representatives of the Jewish National Fund, the Israeli Federation of Labor, a number of state agencies, as well as residents of the agricultural communities themselves. The central question, for NSF head Fay Bennett, was ascertaining exactly how Israel “had organized its resources to make possible the settlement of many thousands of immigrant families in new economically viable rural communities.”¹³⁰

Israeli agricultural development and settlement policies, the visitors discovered, revolved around a balancing of public and private interests. Firstly, Bennett recognized that Israeli farmers were not, in any sense, independent farmers. As far back as the dawn of the twentieth century, settlers had been reliant on the financial assistance of the Jewish National Fund (JNF)—a private organization in part funded by donations from across the Jewish diaspora—for their ability to purchase and occupy the land. Moreover, Bennett

¹²⁸ Maxwell Irving Klayman, *The Moshav in Israel: A Case Study of Institution Building* (Praeger, 1970), 5.

¹²⁹ Klayman, *The Moshav in Israel*, 4.

¹³⁰ Bennett, “Report of Trip to Israel,” box 54, NSFII.

noted that landed nation-building in Palestine was protected from the vicissitudes of the market in various ways. Settlers were not sold their land; rather, the property was leased, on renewable terms, for a period of forty-nine years. The ways Israeli settlement kept the market at bay was particularly resonant to the American visitors; as Bennett reported, she believed that the model could be “effectively utilized in the development of a land program for poor people in the rural South.” “Without a system of land ownership that prevents foreclosure and loss of land, Bennett argued, “neither black nor white ... will be able to gain economic security and political power.”¹³¹

As was immediately apparent to the visitors, the success of agricultural settlements in Palestine was fundamentally dependent on the Israeli state. But the relationship was mutually beneficial. Since the 1930s, agricultural settlements had functioned as military outposts; in return, the Israeli state furnished an institutional apparatus that provided for the marketing of produce, the purchase of capital equipment, and the provision of insurance, irrigation, credit services, education and pesticides. As members of Histadrut (the Israeli National Federation of Labor), settlers were public workers. Thus the Histadrut provided a range of assistance, including credit, social services including education and healthcare, legal representation and employment benefits that undergirded cooperative enterprise. All told, moshav residents’ ability to successfully farm their land could be attributed to a variety of economic, policy and ideological imperatives that placed small farmers at the heart of Israel’s rural (and national) development.¹³²

¹³¹ Bennett, “Report of Trip to Israel,” box 54, NSFPII.

¹³² Klayman, *The Moshav In Israel*, 201-207, 238-241.

Within less than a year, Albert McKnight and Charles Prejean were following Bennett's initial delegation to the Middle East. McKnight was left with no doubts about the relevance of Israel's Green Revolution. "We toured the country," McKnight recalled in his memoirs, "visiting and studying the various kinds of cooperative developments. One of the first things that struck as we traveled ... was how you could turn a desert into a plush green field with enough money." The contrast between development and underdevelopment, McKnight noted, tracked shifting political boundaries. "Being in Israel less than one year after the Seven-Day War," he recalled, "one could readily see the old border lines. On the Israeli side, the fields were green. On the Palestinian and Syrian side, everything was brown."¹³³ The visit to Israel again brought cooperative organizers back to the question of credit; as Prejean noted, he and his fellow travelers in 1969 were more than anything "interested in developmental lending institutions." Part of the appeal of Israeli agricultural development was found, Prejean argued, in the ways it diverged from "normative" approaches to development advanced by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

¹³³ McKnight, *Whistling In the Wind*, 67.



Traveling companions on a 1969 trip to Israel. From left to right: Charles Prejean, John Perkins, the Rev. A. J. McKnight and Ronnie Moore

Figure 3.7. The 1969 Delegation to Israel¹³⁴

As Prejean recalled, “We knew that traditional lending forms were not applicable to the kinds of folks we were working with who had underdeveloped people’s characteristics.”¹³⁵ Impressed by the work done with immigrants from North Africa, the Americans left their multi-week trip with a commitment to “model ... [a] developmental loan company from what we learned.”¹³⁶

The journeys to Israel placed cooperative organizers firmly within the orbit of transnationally circulating flows of developmental knowledge that linked the challenge of black empowerment in the American South to nation-building in the Middle East and, more generally, the challenge of post-colonial state-building in the global South. Although the rural South was also a key testing ground of the Green Revolution, federal state and local inertia—if not outright hostility—toward black rural development efforts

¹³⁴ Photo taken from McKnight, *Whistling in the Wind*, 5.

¹³⁵ Prejean interview, 52.

¹³⁶ Prejean interview, 52.

guaranteed that cooperative organizers had much more limited access to the expertise and resources necessary to transform black farming practices.

Cooperative organizers absorption of international development models did not solely rely on the Israeli example. Following a well worn path of developmental expertise, one trip to Israel in the early 1970s served as a prelude to a trip to Tanzania, where agricultural resettlement had become a central part of President Julius Nyerere's vision of national modernity and economic self-sufficiency.¹³⁷ Connections between Tanzania and black politics had been established by the Civil Rights Movement, when SNCC formed an African Department to bridge the world of anticolonial resistance with the domestic freedom struggle.¹³⁸ As early as 1970, the idea of introducing cooperative workers to the Tanzanian experiment in ujaama socialism had been discussed by Rockefeller Brothers Fund officials. To facilitate this, Thomas Wahman met, at the behest of McKnight, with Father Richard LeClair and Joseph Kimaty, both of whom had been instrumental in establishing credit unions in East Africa. As Wahman wrote, "Father LeClair and Mr. Kimaty went into some detail on how cooperatives have emerged as a basic form of social and economic organization in Tanzania and they explained how the Federation could benefit greatly from a visit to these large-scale endeavors."¹³⁹ Yet despite the international visibility of Tanzanian rural initiatives, it was Israeli agricultural

¹³⁷ As Julius Nyerere wrote in 1969, "an accurate description of Tanzania would be that it is a nation of peasant farmers. Our ultimate objective must be to make the description Tanzania is a nation of cooperative farmers a more true statement. Julius Nyerere, "Presidential Circular No. 1 of 1969," in Rural Development Research Committee, University of Dar es Saalam, *Rural Cooperation in Tanzania* (Tanzania Publishing House, 1975), 27.

¹³⁸ On the history of SNCC in Africa, see Julia Erin Wood, "Freedom is Indivisible: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Cold War Politics and International Liberation Movements," Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 2011, 208-259.

¹³⁹ Thomas W. Wahman to James N. Hyde and William S. Moody, 9 December 1970, folder 2085, box 337, RBF. Unfortunately, the precise details of cooperative organizers travels in Africa are unclear in the archival record.

development that continued to hold the principal attention of African American cooperative workers. This fact, in part, suggests that transnational racial solidarities did not necessarily supersede black efforts to advance “race-neutral” models of development within the boundaries of the liberal center.

Cooperative organizers’ preference for black moshavim over contemporaneous ujamaa cooperatives can also be in part explained by acknowledging Charles Prejean’s aforementioned emphasis of the “cultural” work of Israeli rural institutions. Reiterating a widely-held, post-war conception of the ways “traditional” folkways and practices functioned as fundamental barriers to modernization, one scholar of the Moshav movement wrote in 1970 that “The problem of transforming the postwar immigrants from traditional oriental cultures into modern commercial farmers has been but one part of the national problem of their absorption into a progressive western-type society.”¹⁴⁰ An understanding of moshavim as a vehicle of human “modernization” was often apparent in cooperative movement proposals; as one SDF grant proposal to put it, “Small farmers tend to be traditionalists rather than scientists.”¹⁴¹ And though Charles Prejean was often less inclined than McKnight to emphasize the cultural “dysfunction” of rural communities, FSC proposals noted that effective agricultural development had to be a “total process of educating and re-educating the indigenous people.”¹⁴²

In addition, the establishment of black moshavim was attractive because it offered a solution to the principal woe of low income black cooperatives: scale. “The bulk of cooperative problems,” the SDF asserted, “arise from the fact that volume is too low;

¹⁴⁰ Klayman, *The Moshav in Israel*, 31.

¹⁴¹ SDF, “A Proposal from the Southern Development Foundation,” 6 May 1976, 73-212, Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF.

¹⁴² FSC, “Microregional Development,” 15.

with small acreages, the co-ops cannot afford to pay wages high enough to keep good employees, they are not able to take advantage of the various economies of scale in farming and processing, and it is more expensive to market small lots of produce.”¹⁴³ But efficiencies were only a part of the calculation. As numerous organizers realized, the Israeli model also held considerable intrigue because it offered a way to harmonize black farm practices with the incentives built in to the ways federal funding was apportioned, particularly through the Department of Agriculture. Black farmers in the South were deemed “unattractive” loanees, not only because of longstanding racial discrimination, but also because of a largely cemented equivalence between “legitimate” sources of government largesse and large-scale farmers. As one SDF proposal noted, “the Farm Credit System has not been willing to adequately finance limited resource farmers.”¹⁴⁴ Yet discriminatory lending was often subsumed by the logic of economic rationality as cooperative organizers explanatory concept of choice. As the SDF noted, it was “not entirely the fault of the Farm Credit System because some of the problems lie within the individual’s inability to develop a suitable farm program which justifies a farm loan.”¹⁴⁵ Black moshavim was thus attractive as an institutional model of rural development because of its potential to become “legible” to the state as a legitimate form of agricultural enterprise.

Finally, efforts to transplant models of Israeli agricultural development were undoubtedly incentivized by the support, at least temporarily, of the philanthropic foundations. In particular, Ford’s interest stemmed from a desire to convince both the

¹⁴³ SDF, “A Proposal.”

¹⁴⁴ Southern Development Foundation, “A Proposal from the Southern Development Foundation,” 1 May 1975, 73-212, Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF.

¹⁴⁵ SDF, “A Proposal from the Southern Development Foundation.”

Federation and SCDF to consolidate their efforts. In a long memorandum, Bryant George—who had, in 1972, visited Israel—wrote that the Social Development office had been “casting about to find a model for the cooperative movement as a more firm basis for our funding.”¹⁴⁶ More than anything, George recognized that the marketing arrangements of moshavim—conducted through a central cooperative called the *Tnuva* and its regional offices throughout the country which coordinated planting, sales and distribution of produce—held potential to address what he defined as a “scatter shot” approach to marketing evinced by black cooperatives in the American South.¹⁴⁷ George’s largely optimistic report also demonstrated the ways liberal observers of rural “underdevelopment”—like cooperative organizers themselves—would often conflate policy and culture. George acknowledged the “difference national policy can make,” particularly with regard to the myriad ways in which, as he put it, “American agriculture in the last three decades has been pointed toward extensive ... large scale farming by policy of the United States Department of Agriculture.” By contrast, Israel was “working in the opposite direction ... trying to hold small farmers on the land.” George’s memorandum, however, also defined a contrast between American farmers—the people “left behind”—and Israeli settlers who “would make almost anything go.” “What we and others do with the cooperative movement in this country,” George argued, “has got to take on some part of this spirit.”¹⁴⁸

With one major sponsor of the cooperative movement showing support, the possibilities of Israeli rural development became an increasingly central pillar of the

¹⁴⁶ Bryant George to Mitchell Sviridoff, “The Black Cooperative Movement and Israel,” 24 January 1972, 70-311, R-1690, Grant Files, FF.

¹⁴⁷ George, “The Black Cooperative Movement and Israel.”

¹⁴⁸ George, “The Black Cooperative Movement and Israel.”

funding claims made by the Southern Cooperative Development Fund. Sketching out a program for 1974-75, the Fund elaborated a program that would include a decided shift toward larger-scale farming, with the intention of establishing “three farming settlements, modeled after the Moshav,” with the assistance of technicians supplied by the Israeli government.¹⁴⁹ In recommending to reapprove SDF’s annual funding of \$425,000 a year, Ford noted that McKnight, alongside a number of members Tuskegee’s Human Resource Development Center (HRDC) had recently visited Israel and determined that the Moshav matched “the organizational needs of the low income farmer in the south and the kinds of technical assistance that Israeli technicians have been able to bring to less developed countries in Africa and Central America is applicable to the southern rural situation.”¹⁵⁰

Following an application to the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s Department of International Cooperation, the summer of 1974 saw the arrival of seven Israeli agricultural scientists in the United States to begin working with the five principal SDF cooperatives. Heading in the opposite direction was William Harrison, a founder of SWAFCA who had been appointed Executive Director of the SDF. In late-1974, Harrison a ten month-long training course at the Rehovot Technical Training Institute.¹⁵¹ First among many tasks facing the Israeli technicians was the preparation of a feasibility study which, as McKnight recalled, included “A review of the cooperatives growing operations, the most suitable crops for each area, the potential income expected from intensive farming, and the applicability of the cooperative concept in which the social and

¹⁴⁹ Southern Development Foundation, “Proposal to the Ford Foundation,” n.d., 73-212, Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF.

¹⁵⁰ “Request for Grant Action,” 20 June 1974, 73-212, Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF.

¹⁵¹ “Request for Grant Action.”

economic aspects of community living were intertwined.”¹⁵² And while the black moshavim were envisioned as building on already-established enterprises, efforts to create new cooperatives had begun in earnest in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, where “pioneer” farmers went through extensive preparation in vegetable cultivation with assistance from horticulturalists based at Louisiana State University.¹⁵³

Ford’s response to this initiative was—once again—to lean heavily on the judgment of outside experts. To evaluate the conclusions of the Israeli agricultural scientists, the Foundation contracted with Arnold and Porter—a Washington D.C. law firm specializing in large-scale non-governmental development projects—to commission a study.¹⁵⁴ In addition, Ford began to involve senior scholars working at LSU, Florida A&M and Auburn University in the evaluation of the black moshavim, now rebranded as Agricultural Cooperative Communities (ACCs). In 1976, Ford appointed Norman Efferson, who served as the Dean of Agricultural Science at Louisiana State, to conduct a review of the nascent ACCs. In the abstract, Efferson was impressed by the moshavim movement, noting that “Israel has done a magnificent job of bringing in people from all over the world with many different types of cultural background and molding them, by the Moshav and Kibbutz approaches, into organized, productive, contributing citizens.”¹⁵⁵ With regards to the cooperative movement in the South, however, Efferson was less than optimistic. Central to his reservations was the active role of the Israeli state in subsidizing the costs of agricultural production (particularly water needed for

¹⁵² McKnight, *Whistling In the Wind*, 70.

¹⁵³ “A Proposal from the Southern Development Foundation,” 6 May 1976, 73-212, Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF.

¹⁵⁴ “Arnold and Porter Report.”

¹⁵⁵ Norman Efferson to Eamon Kelly, 18 June 1976, folder “Agricultural Cooperative Communities Correspondence,” box 44, Office Files, Education and Research Division, FF.

irrigation) and the role of the Jewish National Fund in providing the funds necessary to purchase land. Efferson's conclusions, however, also indicated an unchangeable equivalence between black rural life and poverty.

I know Father McKnight and John Brown [head of the SEASHA] see the Moshav concept as the way out for the Black people in the South. I think they have let their emotions drown out their objectivity. As I see it, establishing Moshavim in the South is likely to be very costly and to result in maintaining Blacks at a poverty or near-poverty level for a longer period of time than would otherwise be the case. We are likely to end up with rural slums, and there is nothing worse.¹⁵⁶

The irony that a representative of the Ford Foundation—a central engine of the Green Revolution in the Global South—would express doubt that the technologies of agricultural modernization could do anything for rural African Americans was profound. Development's liberatory potential, Efferson seemed to suggest, was no match for an agricultural South where the terms of political economy—and the region's winners and losers—were already set in stone. Thus, Efferson argued, it made far more sense for the Ford Foundation to advocate for policies that would allow African Americans to leave the region, and rehabilitate urban spaces. In contrast to the vision of economic modernity advanced by proponents of the black cooperativism, Efferson assessed the movement's efforts in ways which, seemingly, foreclosed a viable economic future for rural African Americans.

CONCLUSION

Early in 1979, a Ford Foundation Executive completed a report on his visit with Albert McKnight and the Southern Development Foundation. "Father McKnight," Robert Schrank wrote, "is a crusader. His crusade for the small farmer, I admit, seems like a

¹⁵⁶ Efferson to Kelly, *Ibid.*

great enigma in view of the fact that we are now entering the post-industrial era.” Even after over a decade of support for various segments of the cooperative movement, Schrank remained unconvinced that “the family farm is going to make a comeback.”¹⁵⁷ Another Foundation employee worried about the fate of McKnight’s cherished Agricultural Cooperative Communities. Though an “ambitious undertaking,” Ford’s report worried at “the extent to which there is acceptance among local farmers of the ACC notion.”¹⁵⁸ Unbowed by such pessimism in the ranks of private philanthropy, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives had celebrated their tenth year of existence in 1977. And they remained steadfast in their commitment to the “development of small farmer members of cooperatives,” and the modernization of black farming practices which they hoped could be made profitable, despite all odds.¹⁵⁹

Notwithstanding the promise of growing interest in creating meaningful rural growth, the landscape of southern agriculture remained largely immune to the protestations and efforts of black development workers. In 1978, Father McKnight had spearheaded the creation of the Southern Rural Policy Congress (based in Lafayette), whose stated goals included a commitment to influencing the direction of federal agricultural policy and enhancing the public resources available for rural development projects.¹⁶⁰ The election of President Ronald Reagan, however, led to the abrupt termination of many of the grants available to remaining co-op organizations. Increasingly, cooperatives also became less popular with private financial sources.

¹⁵⁷ Robert Schrank to Sol Chafkin, 28 February 1979, Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF.

¹⁵⁸ B. McDonald, “Site Visit to the Southern Development Foundation—February 14-15, 1979,” 30 March 1979, Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF.

¹⁵⁹ “Quarterly Report of Activities,” 18 November 1977, folder 2095, box 339, RBF.

¹⁶⁰ Steve Suits, “The Southern Regional Council and the Roots of Rural Change,” *Southern Changes* 13:3 (1991), 8-9.

Looking back on the decade, the Southern Development Foundation wrote that “One of the main objectives of the movement was to establish cooperatives which would eventually be able to borrow money from conventional sources, but, to date, this goal has not been realized.” Cooperatives were, SDF wrote, “still very much dependent upon grants, subsidies, and ‘soft’ loans for their continuation.

Over a more than two-decade period, the cooperative movement had wrestled with two aspects of the “rural southern dilemma”: capital and credit. Black moshavim were but the latest in a long line of attempts to legitimize and justify efforts to extend the accumulated resources of private finances, foundations and the federal government to low-income farmers. As the SDF wrote in 1975, “By taking the capital requirements off his back, the Moshav enables the good farmer to prove his productivity.”¹⁶¹

Productivity—that dogma of liberal agricultural policy over four decades—was what the black cooperative movement had been seeking all along. As a modernizing project, however, black developmentalism did not just operate at the level of technocratic reform. Simultaneously, black anti-poverty efforts in the rural South framed modernization in human terms, and in ways that could be apprehended by a liberal center increasingly convinced by cultural and behavioral explanations of black economic deprivation. As such, the terrain of representation would quickly become critical to the repertoire of African American rural development work, as the following chapter illuminates.

¹⁶¹ SDF, “A Proposal from the Southern Development Foundation,” 6 May 1976, 73-212, Reel R-5787, Grant Files, FF.

CHAPTER 4

Representing the Race

Southern Rural Action, Black Domesticity, and the Visual Language of Development

At the literal, emotional and symbolic center of “Living in the Country”—an anti-poverty pamphlet and photographic essay published in 1972—sits a solitary child. Female, African-American, and no more than ten years old, the child sits on a mattress with her head in her hand. Her surroundings are sparse; the room has no furnishings beyond the bed, and the bare wood walls are peeling all over. All told, the images evokes an archetypal vision of rural deprivation. In its stark black and white aesthetics, it is reminiscent of the classical humanist documentary style developed by Works Progress Administration photographers in the 1930s.¹ The pamphlet’s authorial voice, repeating the words of the child, draws attention to both the little girl’s sense of despair, as well as the hardships and profound limitations of her surroundings: “I was thinking ... How can I ... get ... out of here.”² Significantly, the child is also alone. Though a figure of human potential, she is disconnected from any immediate social or familial relationship that might sustain her, or her future life. In its examination of the intimacies and travails of rural black life, the photo-essay presents a world seemingly outside of time. Nonetheless, the images cannot be read outside of politics.

¹ Colleen McDannell, *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great Depression* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 5-7; on the power of photography to frame understandings of and generate sympathy for black social movements, see Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

² Anon., quoted in *Southern Rural Action* (hereafter SRA), “Living in the Country,” (1972), 15.

“Living in the Country” served as promotional material for the work of Southern Rural Action (SRA). Another critical institution of black developmentalism, SRA attempted to address the social and economic hardships of African Americans living and working in a region immersed in the throes of economic modernization, population exodus and endemic poverty.



Figure 4.1. “How Can I Get Out of Here.”³

The driving force behind these efforts was Randolph T. Blackwell, a “broker in ideas and money” whose involvement in social change and African American public life stretched back to the 1920s.⁴ Between 1966 and the late 1970s, SRA attempted to rebuild (or in many instances create anew) the economic foundations of rural areas by providing stable,

³ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 15.

⁴ George W. Groh, *The Black Migration: The Journey to Urban America* (New York, NY: Weybright and Talley, 1972), 101.

long-term employment for local residents, while ensuring that the fruits of their labor would ultimately benefit themselves and the local community. To that end, Blackwell's organization lent financial assistance and technical expertise to a range of local ventures that included textile plants, affordable housing initiatives, and concrete brick factories. Relying on the connections to a larger anti-poverty community he had established during his time as Project Director for Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Blackwell and SRA's work eventually reached over one hundred communities in five states across the black rural South.

The material changes effected by the organization was, however, only part of the story. Crucially, this chapter explores how Blackwell and Southern Rural Action framed their rural revitalization initiatives in the politicized idioms of gender and the black family. In this regard, such rural development work was indicative of broader tendencies in contemporaneous nationalist projects. As one scholar has noted, the near "universal" deployment of gendered rhetoric in such political projects "used family metaphors more widely than their [political] predecessors, stressed fraternal over paternal ties, introduced "mothers" as important actors, and based their ideals on the bourgeois family."⁵ Such was the case in the rural South. In part, the representative practices exemplified by "Living in the Country" demonstrate the extent to which the transformation of the black domestic sphere became a crucial aspect of black modernity-making. Yet such practices which, this chapter argues, constituted a "visual language" of Black Power were also calibrated to the terms of a political culture forever transformed by the Moynihan Report. By assigning the black family primacy as a unit of rehabilitation, Blackwell and SRA attempted to make

⁵ Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 5.

their developmental claims legible and valuable to the liberal state.⁶ And it did so, increasingly, at the expense of other aspects of a developmental vision that had long emphasized the linkages between black poverty, federal policy and political economy.

Published in 1965, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* was perhaps the most influential policy paper of the 1960s.⁷ Known colloquially as the “Moynihan Report,” the document became named for its author and driving intellectual force, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Predicting a “new crisis in race relations,” the Report called attention to what Moynihan identified as the so-called “breakdown” of African American culture. Critically, Moynihan argued, this development could be primarily explained by the aberrant structure of the black family. As the report’s second chapter began, “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family.”⁸ Defining black family as a “tangle of pathology,” the report noted the disproportionately matriarchal (female-headed) organization of black domestic life, which “seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.”⁹

⁶ As Lynn Hunt has argued in her working advancing notions of “political culture,” struggles for power are often conducted at the level of representation. See Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 54.

⁷ The relationship between the Moynihan Report and African American life is relatively unexplored in the existing literature. James T. Patterson, *Freedom Is Not Enough: the Moynihan Report and America’s Struggle over Black Family Life, from LBJ to Obama* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010); see also Steve Estes, *I am a Man!: Race, Manhood and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 107-30; Daniel Geary, “Racial Liberalism, the Moynihan Report, and the Daedalus Project on ‘The Negro American,’” *Daedalus* 140:1 (2011), 53-66; Kevin J. Mumford, “Untangling Pathology: The Moynihan Report and Homosexual Damage, 1965-1975,” *Journal of Policy History* 24:1 (2012), 53-73.

⁸ The report made four separate empirical claims to buttress this notion; that nearly a quarter of urban Negro marriages ended in dissolution, that nearly a quarter of African American children were born illiterate, and that roughly twenty-five percent of family units were headed by women. See Daniel P. Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965), 5, 6-10.

⁹ Moynihan, “The Negro Family,” 29. It is of course critical to note the extent to which Moynihan’s insight drew on the work of E. Franklin Frazier, who had argued as early as the 1930s about the effect of slavery on the composition of the African American family. See E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the*

Numerous civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Bayard Rustin, James Farmer and Whitney Young offered a range of broadly critical responses to the report. Farmer, the head of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), was less reticent than most, calling the report a “massive academic cop-out for the white conscience” that implied that full freedom would forever await African Americans until the moment “we learn to behave ourselves and stop buying Cadillacs instead of bread.”¹⁰ Despite varying levels of agreement about the central assumptions of the report, such race leaders concurred that any effective diagnosis of black familial malaise had to begin with the economic roots of the so-called “crisis.” Bayard Rustin, in particular, was insistent on this point, reminding readers of the journal *America* that Moynihan’s Report had even acknowledged that the “Negro family ... has lived in a depression-like atmosphere ever since the 1930’s, and the result has been a predictable breakdown.”¹¹

More revealingly, however, the various leaders also agreed on certain key assumptions about the *ideal* organization of black family life, and the centrality of family and proscribed gender roles to black political claims. As King noted in a speech he gave on a number of occasions in the mid-1960s, “The institution of the family is decisive in determining not only if a person has the capacity to love another individual but in the larger social sense whether he is capable of loving his fellow men collectively.”¹²

United States (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966). But as Daryl Scott observes, the Moynihan Report must be understood as being a product of post-World War II racial liberalism, which attempted, however clumsily, to utilize “damage imagery” for anti-racist ends. See Daryl Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), ch. 9; see also Scott, “The Politics of Pathology: The Ideological Concerns of the Moynihan Controversy,” *Journal of Policy History* 8:1 (1996), 81-105.

¹⁰ James Farmer, quoted in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, eds., *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), 410.

¹¹ Bayard Rustin, quoted in *The Moynihan Report*, 422.

¹² King, quoted in *The Moynihan Report*, 403.

Likewise, Bayard Rustin argued that “the Negro family can be reconstructed only when the Negro male is permitted to be the economic and psychological head of the family.”¹³ Turning the Report’s conclusions to his own ends, Eldridge Cleaver linked the class dysfunctions of American society to what he perceived as the growth of homosexuality within black communities.¹⁴ Needless to say, none of the major, male race leaders—at least publically—did much to challenge the report’s contentions on gender terms. A relatively lone voice, welfare rights activist Johnnie Tillmon pointedly observed the “lies that male society tells about welfare mothers; that AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] mothers are immoral, that AFDC mothers are lazy, misuse their welfare checks, spend it all on booze and are stupid and incompetent.”¹⁵

This conversation—encompassing Black Power, liberal understandings of poverty and racial representation (particularly of African American women)—was fundamental to the broader ideological landscape that black developmental politics would be compelled to navigate after 1965. In ways that had been largely subdued beforehand, the Moynihan Report forced developmental advocates such as Randolph Blackwell to bridge the public, political arena of African American life with private questions of black domestic practices.¹⁶ This chapter’s focus on the gender concerns of Blackwell and SRA reveals the extent to which increasingly *cultural* understandings of development—articulated in the idioms of family, self-help, community responsibility—began to disarticulate

¹³ Rustin, quoted in *The Moynihan Report*, 418.

¹⁴ For a broader explication of Cleaver’s views on the subject, see Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 176-90.

¹⁵ Tillmon, quoted in Ula Taylor, “The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29:2 (1998), 247.

¹⁶ On the “mutual constituency” of black private and public life, see Candice M. Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 33.

development from a critique—or any reliance on the role of the liberal state.¹⁷ There was a paradox in this. Despite the crucial role federal dollars played in early SRA efforts, the “self-help” ethos underlining many of the projects, the rhetoric of autonomous community control and the broader focus on the social importance of the nuclear family marginalized, and increasingly devalued the credibility of discussions about the distribution of resources and power, existing institutional arrangements and the role of the state in perpetuating African American poverty. Giving voice to an increasingly anti-statist strand of black political culture, Coretta Scott King noted emphatically (after visiting a SRA-sponsored event in rural Alabama) that she was “not going to wait on our government any longer.”¹⁸

Repudiating the Moynihan Report’s accusations of black familial dysfunction and absent male breadwinners, Blackwell and SRA’s work proscribed certain kinds of gendered, developmental labor to rural African Americans. Firstly, black rural economic empowerment was only possible, SRA’s rhetorical choices and concrete actions suggest, in the context of fully functioning, nuclear, heterosexual family units. SRA attempted to accomplish this goal by providing wage labor for adult males, a move that aimed to stem the tide of rural outmigration and to encourage and enable such men to fully assume their patriarchal roles as heads of families. Moreover, SRA sought to strengthen the economic foundations of black family life in the rural South by providing African American women with work, particularly in garment factories. Finally, these men and women would be established as property owners living in brick, single family homes that would replace the

¹⁷ As Lisa Duggan has argued, it is through cultural that the agenda of neoliberal economics and politics is often framed. See Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 15.

¹⁸ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 18.

wooden shacks that signified both their perilous existence and the historical and material legacies of slavery. Thus, I argue, Blackwell and SRA defined black economic modernity within a culturally legitimate framework of home ownership, productive labor, family, bourgeois respectability and consumer capitalism. This project was in many senses evidence for what one critic has called a “politics of the possible” that attempted to use liberalism’s “own language and rules to force change beyond the boundaries of liberal equality.”¹⁹

In doing so, it drew out the latent ties between developmental politics and the “uplift” tradition in black political life. In this regard, black developmentalism held much in common with what Michelle Mitchell calls a politics of “racial destiny” that since the late 19th century had “politicized the most private aspects of black life.”²⁰ Moreover, it relied on a natalist ethos—what one theorist calls a “reproductive futurism”—that placed the imperiled black child at the center of Southern Rural Action’s developmental imaginary.²¹ Indeed, the particulars of Blackwell’s biography suggest that the developmental politics he represented could fundamentally coexist with a race-building logic that, in Blackwell’s case, could be traced to family’s involvement with the Garvey

¹⁹ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, xviii; on the taming influence of liberalism on Black Power more generally, see Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

²⁰ Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 12. The ties between an older reform politics and the radicalism of the late 1960s has begun to be acknowledged. As Daniel Matlin has argued, Black Power represented a new iteration of “uplift” politics, one premised on the patriarchal “disciplining” of black families. In his analysis of Amiri Baraka, Matlin shows persuasively how the racialist logic undergirding the impulses of Black Power produced a series of essentialized, “traditional” gender roles that precluded a more radical analysis of the intersections of gender- and race-based exploitation. See Daniel Matlin, “‘Lift Up Yr Self!’ Reinterpreting Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Black Power, and the Uplift Tradition” *Journal of American History* 93:1 (2006), 91-116.

²¹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 3. As Edelman argues, the figure of the “child”—as opposed to any actually existing child—provides political actors with cultural legitimacy and a place within the legitimate parameters of political discourse.

movement of the 1920s. By the late 1960s, this tendency would be revived in in his seemingly odd evocation of Booker T. Washington. Far from revealing the conservative heart of black developmentalism, Blackwell's reformulation of Washingtonian politics was indicative of the ways in which attempts to achieve black economic modernity were necessarily embedded in, and responsive to the legitimate terms of political discourse.

POLITICAL ORIGINS

Randolph Talmadge Blackwell was born to Joe and Blanche Blackwell on the 10th of March, 1927 in Greensboro, North Carolina. From his earliest years, Randolph recalled that he was "involved in something related to social change."²² In memories of his childhood, Randolph recalled being taken by his father to meetings of the Greensboro Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) branch, where up to fifty members would be present.²³ Moreover, Randolph had regularly distributed and sold Garveyite literature such as the *Negro World* and its successor, the *Black Man* as a youth, and recalled being taken on political field trips by his father, including one to the prison in Atlanta in which Garvey had been held, and another to a black-owned and staffed

²² "Randolph Blackwell Interview with William Chafe," 5 March 1973, William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection (hereafter Blackwell interview). <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/ref/collection/CivilRights/id/753>, accessed online 27 February 2016.

²³ William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 27. The strength of the UNIA in North Carolina grew exponentially during the 1920s, with over fifty divisions forming. At its height, the Greensboro division numbered over five hundred members. Following a decline in membership in the late 1920s, the Greensboro division was invigorated in the late 1920s by a move from the East side of Greensboro, as well as an influx of new members from a number of other educational centers, including Dudley High School, the Sedalia Institute and Bennett College. See "News and Views of U.N.I.A. Divisions: Greensboro, N.C.," *Negro World*, 14 July 1928. For a follow up report on Haynes' trip to the South, see "Hon. S.A. Haynes Inspires Members to Go Forward Unafraid With the Work," *Negro World*, 29 September 1928. Marcus Garvey spoke at the North Carolina Negro State Fair in Greensboro in 1922, where he reminded his listeners of the virtues of life in the segregated South, where black business ownership was encouraged. For further details, see *Greensboro Daily Record*, quoted in "Marcus Garvey Excoriates Race Down in North Carolina," *The Negro World*, 11 November 1922.

insurance company.²⁴ Indeed, Randolph's father, Joe—a railroad worker whose plans for the future revolved around ownership of his own coal yard—considered lessons in the necessity of economic self-determination and racial pride a crucial part of his parental obligations. As a result, Joe refused to allow any of his eight children—six of whom would go on to attend college—to hold jobs that placed them under the direct control of whites.²⁵

Having energized a politics that expanded both the global vision and the class parameters of African American political life, the decline of the Garveyite movement in the 1930s left the Blackwell family searching for a new organizational vehicle to advance the cause of racial dignity. As Randolph recalled later in life, “the further we got away from 1927 [the year of Garvey’s deportation] the more the need developed to find another umbrella [organization].”²⁶ By the early 1940s Joe, and his now-teenage son Randolph had found their answer: the NAACP. Though supposedly an organization of bourgeois sensibilities that, as in Greensboro, was a preserve of the black middle class, the early 1940s were a period of energy and expansion across the Association’s southern branches. Indeed, the rapid growth of NAACP membership in this period convinced Joe that what “he couldn’t do through the Garvey movement could possibly be done ... through the NAACP.”²⁷

²⁴ Groh, *The Black Migration*, 101.

²⁵ William H. Chafe, “Presidential Address: ‘The Gods Bring Threads to Webs Begun’,” *The Journal of American History* 86:4 (2000), 540. Given Joe’s occupation as a railroad worker in the late 1920s and 1930s, it seems reasonable to assume that Randolph would have been aware of the activities of A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Crucially, the Brotherhood enlarged African Americans’ understanding of freedom to include access to stable, and better paying industrial jobs. See Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 27, 31.

²⁶ Blackwell interview.

²⁷ Blackwell interview.

The ability of the NAACP to absorb the political energies of Garveyism could be partially accredited to a woman who would soon become a formative influence on the young Randolph: Ella Baker. Working as NAACP's branch secretary between 1940 and 1946, Baker was instrumental in breathing new life into the Association across the South. In 1944, she arrived in Greensboro; the effect, as in other branches across the South, was electric. Arguing that the existing leadership classes within many African American communities acted as a significant barrier to effecting social change, Baker critiqued the effectiveness of a politics rooted in notions of "respectability" that excluded many working class African Americans from the struggle. Rather, Baker argued, the NAACP had to be pushed to simultaneously expand both its base and its agenda.²⁸ Such rhetoric deeply resonated with a student from Dudley High School in the audience. "I was frankly mesmerized," Blackwell recalled. "She spoke of professional preparation, the depths of injustice and the nature of individual commitment."²⁹ Taking up the challenge posed by Baker, Randolph soon formed an NAACP Youth Council chapter at Dudley High School, and immersed himself in the hard work of expanding the senior branch's membership. In one drive alone, 1350 new members were added to the rolls, with Blackwell personally responsible for recruiting sixteen new members.³⁰

In 1945, Blackwell joined the Allied Forces in Western Europe, before returning to North Carolina "intent on picking [up] the effort to get Black Citizens registered to vote."³¹ Educational opportunities also beckoned on his return from Europe, and in 1946

²⁸ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 105-147.

²⁹ "The Voice of Protest: Ella Baker, Legend of the Civil Rights Movement," *Washington Post*, 14 December 1978.

³⁰ "Greensboro Branch Secures Record Membership," 26:A, 15, NAACP Papers.

³¹ Blackwell, "Patricia Sullivan Interview," (hereafter Sullivan interview), Progressive Part Oral History Interview, 1975-1982, Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University. Blackwell enlisted on the 8th of August,

Blackwell enrolled at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical University (A&T) in Greensboro. Blackwell's time as a student at A&T saw his increasing immersion in both Greensboro and North Carolina politics. Sharpening what might be termed a left-populist politics, Blackwell committed himself to challenging the power of black Greensboro leaders who marshalled African American voters into supporting "favored" white candidates. Blackwell also attempted to support the political aspirations of non-traditional candidates and demolish the "notion that the right to occupy public office belongs to certain kinds of folk."³² Later in the decade, Blackwell would also run for the North Carolina state legislature, and though he lost, he considered his efforts a "political education" for the black Greensboro community.³³ Not long after that campaign, Blackwell became heavily involved with Henry Wallace's Progressive Party campaign of 1948, when he actively campaigned in both North Carolina and Georgia to get Wallace on the ballot.³⁴ As Palmer Weber, Wallace's Campaign Director for the South recalled, Blackwell headed a campaign at A&T that qualified over three thousand black voters.³⁵ Coming face to face with the complexities of southern politics and race relations rural Georgia convinced Blackwell to never abandon the possibility of interracial organizing between African Americans and working class whites.³⁶ As he recalled vividly, a backwoods white church "extremely" rural part of Georgia had constructed a sign that proclaimed faith in a "brotherhood of mankind without regards to race."³⁷

1945, at the age of 18. After initially being sent to Fort Bragg in North Carolina, Blackwell began a tour of duty that would last for six months.

³² Blackwell, "Sullivan interview."

³³ Blackwell interview.

³⁴ Blackwell, "Sullivan interview."

³⁵ "Palmer Weber, 1914-1986," *Southern Changes* 8:6 (1986), 7.

³⁶ See Blackwell, "A Debate between Mr. Stokely Carmichael [SNCC] and Mr. Randolph Blackwell [SCLC]," 13 July 1966. Copy in possession of author.

³⁷ Blackwell, quoted in "A Debate."

In the late 1940s and early 1950s Blackwell's involvement in politics would take a back seat to his academic endeavors. After graduating from A&T in 1949 with a degree in Sociology, Randolph would go on to earn an L.L.B. from Howard University in 1953. Blackwell's time at Howard included conducting research in preparation for the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case alongside a cadre of economists, sociologists, and historians.³⁸ After post-graduate study in Economics at Syracuse University, Blackwell was offered a position teaching Social Science at Winston-Salem Teachers College in North Carolina, where we would work between September 1953 and June 1954. For the majority of the following decade, however, Blackwell would hold the position of Associate Professor of Economics at Alabama A&M College in Normal.³⁹

Nonetheless, the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement compelled a return to political organizing. After establishing himself as a leader of the sit-ins in nearby Huntsville in 1962, Blackwell was soon offered a position at a new civil rights organization: the Voter Education Project (VEP).⁴⁰ Formed in 1962, the VEP was charged with addressing the problem of spectacularly low levels of black voter registration, as well as distributing food and clothes, setting up mass meetings, establishing citizenship schools and attempting "youth work" with local children. Though

³⁸ Blackwell, "Perspective," 9.

³⁹ "Biographical Sketch," in *Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Microfilm Edition*, Part 4: Reel 7, 0615; Blackwell published frequently throughout the decade, Blackwell would also co-author a textbook, *Principles of Economics*, contributing to a chapter on the various forms of business organization. See Blackwell, "Organization of Business: Proprietorship, Partnership, Corporation, and Cooperative," in The Committee on Principles of Economics, *Principles of Economics* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1959), 104-132.

⁴⁰ The evidence on Blackwell's involvement is sparse, to say the least. For the two references I have been able to locate, see "Blackwell, Randolph T. (1927-1981)," King Papers Project at Stanford University, http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_blackwell_randolph_t_1927_1981.1.html, accessed 24 February 2016. Groh, *The Black Migration*, 101.

many activists believed that the project amounted to nothing more than a co-optation of the movement, the establishment of the VEP allowed significant levels of foundation money to be directed towards efforts in the South.⁴¹ During his time with the organization, Blackwell logged over 185,000 miles across the region.⁴² This work was soon recognized by the organization at the heart of the civil rights movement: Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. On the 6th of June, 1964, Blackwell joined the SCLC, despite his admission to King that he felt Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was "philosophically sounder" than the minister's organization.⁴³ Appointed to the position of Program Director, Blackwell was to serve as a coordinator, organizer and manager of the Conference's efforts from the central office in Atlanta, a position which complemented Blackwell's belief that SCLC had to transfer its protest politics into long-term, power-oriented change.⁴⁴ Critical to the organization of the Selma-Montgomery marches in 1965, Blackwell had "the stay-at-

⁴¹ As Charles Payne has detailed, the VEP's represented the Kennedy administration's unwillingness to publicly antagonize recalcitrant southern politicians. Wanting to assist the efforts of civil rights workers in the South, yet determined not lose support for other policy initiatives, Kennedy and his aides established the VEP as an organization dedicated to conducting "research" in some of the most hostile areas of the Deep South. See Payne, Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 108-109.

⁴² Blackwell, Randolph. "A Mississippi Field Report," *Southern Regional Conference Microfilm*, VI: 205. On February 28th 1963, Blackwell and two other field workers were followed, and fired upon, in Leflore County, Mississippi. See "Mississippi County is Turned into Major Battleground of Negroes' Civil Rights Fight," *New York Times*, 6 April 1963. Blackwell was also at Medgar Evers' house the night before his assassination, playing with his children. See Jack Anderson, "Blackwell: A Good Man in the Wrong Job," *The Hour*, 27 January 1978.

⁴³ Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1977), 446.

⁴⁴ As Blackwell put it, "We [SCLC] must acknowledge that in the past years our creativity and imagination were not employed in learning how to develop power." Going forward, Blackwell believed wholeheartedly that African American activism had to be undergirded by what he called a "mature realism." As he put it, "Stumbling and groping through the wilderness finally must be replaced by a planned, organized and orderly march." See Blackwell, "Power for the Powerless—SCLC's Basic Challenge," folder 30, box 144, part 4, SCLC Papers (hereafter SCLC). This position in many senses is reminiscent of Bayard Rustin's attempts to transfer..... Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary* (February 1965), 25-31.

home job,” he recalled, handling the mobilization, resources and media from Atlanta.”⁴⁵

Blackwell was also insistent the marches be as large as possible, convinced that they represented a “historical moment” in the evolution of the civil rights struggle.⁴⁶

More revealing than Blackwell’s central role in shaping the grand events of the movement, however, were his contributions to the programmatic operations of the organization. Like Ella Baker before him, Blackwell was deeply concerned by the fraught relationship between the SCLC and the local communities it brought into the national spotlight.⁴⁷ With economic reprisals common, Blackwell was critical of flimsy relief efforts (and SCLC carelessness) that displayed “little or no understanding of poverty in the broader sense.”⁴⁸ It was this context that Blackwell suggested that black communities in Dallas County, Alabama might be better served by developing “a program for self-help employment rather than immediate relief.” To this end, Blackwell proposed a number of “long-range” programs that would bridge the world of protest to his later commitment to developmental anti-poverty work. Such programs, he argued, were critical “both in terms of what they can mean to the community and what they can mean to the future history of S.C.L.C.”⁴⁹

In an effort to institutionalize this agenda, Black pushed SCLC ministers to create department of Labor and Economic Affairs. As Blackwell argued, “Since the economic question is at points the basic issue confronting the Negro and the poor generally, a department dealing specifically with these matters is of towering importance.”⁵⁰ And

⁴⁵ Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 448.

⁴⁶ Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 449.

⁴⁷ On Baker’s critique, see Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 170-83;

⁴⁸ Blackwell, “A Report on a Visit to Selma, Alabama, Along with Proposed Programs,” 10 May 1965, MLK, general correspondence.

⁴⁹ Blackwell, “A Report on a Visit to Selma.”

⁵⁰ Blackwell, “Power for the Powerless.”

given his growing position of influence within the organization, Blackwell soon got his way. Formally headed by C.T. Vivian, but with sizeable input from Blackwell, the new Department of Economic Affairs was charged with the responsibility of exploring the “educational, social, economic and vocational deprivation of the Negro community.”⁵¹ Soon thereafter, the Department of Economics began to receive Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) funds to pursue community development projects in a number of southern counties. Established as a means of “restructuring community and breaking the cycle of poverty and prejudice,” such projects were—in Blackwell’s mind—the first forays into a larger progressive challenge to the cycle of poverty and racism plaguing the region. As he put it in a letter to King, “The wheels are in motion for a possible complete renaissance in the South. Such a renaissance will require very careful planning.”⁵²

Blackwell’s time with the SCLC, however, was drawing to a close. By mid-1966, his position within the group, he believed, was untenable. In a long letter to King, Blackwell listed twenty separate issues that he argued were hampering SCLC.⁵³ By 1966, however, Blackwell had sharpened what might be characterized as a broadly leftist, materially-grounded populism that acknowledged the centrality of class, economic exploitation and the contradictions of capital in American life. Blackwell’s political imaginary drew eclectically on a number of sources, including that of Ella Baker, Garveyism, the influence of old left (as represented by the industrial unionism of the

⁵¹ “Report—Dialogue Department,” SCLC 4, 145:25; the influence of Blackwell on the organizational and intellectual development of SCLC is completely unacknowledged in the existing literature. Blackwell’s name appears only anecdotally in the voluminous scholarship on SCLC, without any attention to his role in reforming either the practice or programmatic goals of the organization. Indeed, correspondence between Blackwell and King suggests that he had to go to some length the head minister of the efficacy of introducing an economic analysis—in both theoretical and programmatic terms—to the work of SCLC.

⁵² Blackwell to King, 27 January 1966, KP, general correspondence.

⁵³ Blackwell to King, “A General Overview of S.C.L.C.,” 14 February 1966, KP, general correspondence.

CIO), the historical memory of the late-nineteenth century agrarian insurgencies, and scholarly interventions in social scientific literature which drew, in various ways, on Marxist political thought.⁵⁴

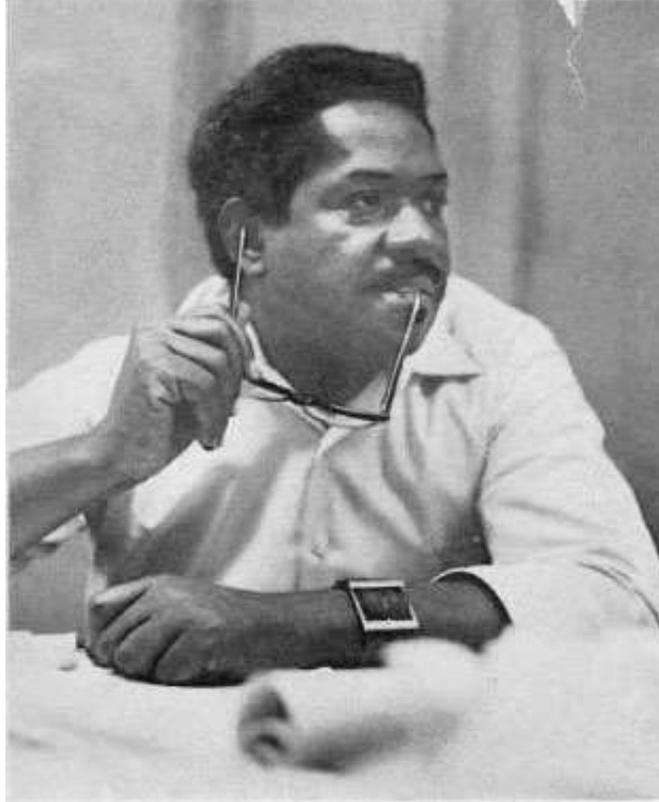


Figure 4.2. Randolph Blackwell, circa early-1970s.

Indeed, one man needed no convincing of the intellectual and organizational value Blackwell had brought to the SCLC. As Martin Luther King wrote in a long, weary, yet heartfelt letter to Blackwell, “You came to the conference bearing great gifts of a brilliant mind, dedicated spirit, a keen insight into the political and economic issues confronting our movement, and above all, an unswerving devotion to the cause of freedom and

⁵⁴ Blackwell’s interest in the Populists emerges most clearly in a debate he conducted with Stokely Carmichael in 1966. As he argued unequivocally at Spelman College, the movement needed to “usher in another Populist period.” In general, the debate remains perhaps the best source for understanding the broad contours of Blackwell’s thought as it existed by the mid-1960s. See Blackwell, “A Debate.”

human dignity ... I hope you will not forget us ... May God continue to bless you in all your endeavors.”⁵⁵

SOUTHERN RURAL ACTION

Between 1966 and the late 1970s, Blackwell’s vision for solving the problem of African American poverty found its clearest expression. On the 31st of August 1966, the Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP)—a broad coalition of other one hundred and twenty five groups and community leaders that, as the *Washington Post* noted, was a “a private agency to help keep the public war on poverty honest”—announced the formation of the Southern Rural Action Project, with Blackwell at its head.⁵⁶ SRA’s first headquarters was established in a tiny two-room office in Atlanta. From there, the organization began work in Taliaferro County, Georgia, a place that—like everywhere else SRA would touch over the next decade—had a specific demographic profile: overwhelmingly poor, heavily African American and quickly de-populating.⁵⁷ Blackwell himself characterized his chosen spaces of operation as places that “have been going downhill for the past 100 years.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. to Randolph T. Blackwell, 16 August 1966, King Papers, general correspondence.

⁵⁶“New Towns and Old, Black Communities,” *Washington Post*, 14 June 1974; “A Private Program To Organize Poor In South is Planned,” *New York Times*, 1 September 1966; “Atlantan to Head New Poverty Unit,” *Atlanta Journal*, 11 August 1966. The foundation of SRA was subject to significant disagreement within the hierarchy of the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty. Fay Bennett, executive secretary of the CCAP, wrote to Blackwell, that she feared the project would tend toward paternalism wherein “northern affluent committees adding their bit for the poor in the rural South.” See “Fay Bennett to Randolph Blackwell,” 30 September 1966, folder 12, box 24, NSCF 1.

⁵⁷ In Taliaferro County, for instance, where the median income for a family of four was only around \$35 per week, African Americans comprised over sixty percent of the population. One of the smallest counties in Georgia, Taliaferro could in 1960 count a population of only 3,370, a number that represented a 25.4% decrease from the county’s 1950 level. See “Census of the Population 1960: Georgia, Characteristics of the Population,” *US Census Bureau* (Volume 1, Part 12), 34.

⁵⁸ “Rural Action Helps to Give Poor Southern Blacks Jobs and Pride,” *New York Times*, 8 May 1972.

In the short term, SRA was attempting to address the consequences of a school desegregation conflict in the county seat of Crawfordville that had led to the firing of a number of locals. In an attempt to bolster locals' economic and political autonomy, SRA established a number of light industry initiatives. With modest start-up capital, totaling \$10,200—one half from the National Council of Negro Women and one half from the private Stern family fund—SRA established a textile and silkscreen enterprise. Entering a rural community where most women only had experience as agricultural workers or as domestic labor, SRA spent the first eight weeks training a total of eighteen women in industrial sewing, screen printing and plant supervision. In response to increasing orders and workloads, this modest initial workforce was soon expanded to forty-two. Quickly, the business had become the largest single employer in the entire county.⁵⁹ Though initially on precarious financial ground, Crawfordville Enterprises was buttressed by a number of financial contributions, including loans of \$900,000 and \$212,700 from the Office of Economic Opportunity, a Farmers Home Administration grant of \$123,000 as well as a number of other private sources.⁶⁰ By 1975, the factory was producing around 43,000 fake fur coats a year. Moreover, the women at the factory were earning up to \$3.50 an hour, a substantial improvement from the weekly wage of \$3 some took home before SRA had arrived.⁶¹

Late in 1968, the organization moved into the Alabama Black Belt. In Greene County, SRA established a co-operative concrete block factory and a home construction fund. Producing cost-efficient housing, complete with three bedrooms, living room,

⁵⁹ "It Works: III. In Rural Georgia a Small Co-Op Booms ... and Destroys a Myth," in NSF 1, 24:13

⁶⁰ Richard W. Boone to Executive Committee of CCAP National Board, 25 August 1967, NSF.

⁶¹ "Southern Blacks Help Themselves," *Ebony*, 82; later, SRA helped establish a secondary operation in Crawfordville, a woodworking plant for local men.

kitchen, bath, and plumbing for around \$3,500 per unit, the idea was soon exported to nearby Wilcox County, as well as Mound Bayou, Mississippi and Plains, Georgia, the hometown of Governor (and future President) Jimmy Carter.”⁶² In Wilcox County, Alabama, SRA’s efforts were given vocal support by Coretta Scott King, who would become an ever more vocal cheerleader for the group in the years ahead.⁶³ Visiting Camden in June of 1969, King addressed local residents and viewed the effects of SRA’s work for herself. At that event—after having been harangued by five locals—King put up \$2000 of the required \$3500 to fund a water system. As one person told her, “Mrs. King, you don’t understand what we’re talking about. When you have to go four miles to get a bucket of water, you have to make the difficult decision of whether to drink it or take a bath.”⁶⁴ Following another fund-raising drive selling fish and chicken sandwiches on weekends, the remaining balance was raised, and the Whiskey Run Water System was born. In Perry County, Blackwell was instrumental in the establishment of Southwest Alabama Farmers Cooperative Association.⁶⁵ Elsewhere in Alabama, in Hale and Dallas counties, SRA established adult literacy and pre-school programs, as well as a small bakery designed—through its use of soybean flour—to improve the protein intake of residents.⁶⁶

In Plains, Georgia—a town in the far Southwest of the state that was home to only seven hundred people—SRA established perhaps its most expansive project. In addition

⁶² The project in Greene County, like that of Crawfordville, was rooted in African Americans’ attempts to vote in local elections. See “Block Factory in Greene Country Plans to Build \$3,500 Houses,” *Southern Courier*, 2 July 1967.

⁶³ In an interview with *Ebony* in 1970, Coretta Scott King would tell *Ebony* that SRA was one of the concerns closest to her heart. See “Finally, I’ve Begun to Live Again,” *Ebony* (November 1970), 174.

⁶⁴ “Black Land Loss,” 111.

⁶⁵ Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and Civil Rights in Alabama, 1964-1972* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 287.

⁶⁶ “Progress Report on CAP Southern Rural Action Projects,” folder 12, box 24, NSF 1.

to a brick-making plant and a roof-truss plant capable of producing over sixty trusses a day—an operation where workers received six months training before they even started work—the project included a community center costing in excess of \$20,000 dollars (built by local teenagers from scratch) and a day care center. Finally, SRA commenced construction of “Africana Village,” a housing development of fifteen homes costing between \$9,000 and \$15,000, with mortgage payments of between thirty-five and sixty-five dollars a month, dependent on income and family size. All told, by the mid-1970s SRA-led initiatives had touched a number of other communities in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and Mississippi.

By the mid-1970s, SRA had even founded its own technical college: the Southern Rural Action Institute. Relying on Department of Labor funds, primarily, the Institute was located in a three story building in Atlanta containing around 24,000 square feet of space, and charged with the goal was of deepening the skill base of rural workers.⁶⁷ As SRA’s 1974-75 bulletin put it, “The SRA institute is similar to other vocational-career development training institutions except that it deliberately seeks to attract trainees from rural communities in the southeastern part of the United States.”⁶⁸ Eschewing “traditional” higher education, the institute focused on the people “unable to pursue such an education and who need concentrated learning in a lucrative trade in a minimum period of time.”⁶⁹ More than simply training vocational skills, the institute also attempted to offer the rudiments of business management and entrepreneurship. Classes in carpentry, for instance, mandated supplementary study in business mathematics,

⁶⁷ “Southern Rural Action on the Launching Pad,” *Congressional Record*, 16837; “A Proposal Submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor by Southern Rural Action Inc.,” SSP, 21.

⁶⁸ “Southern Rural Action Institute Bulletin, 1974-75 Session,” box 21, SSP.

⁶⁹ “Southern Rural Action Institute Bulletin.”

bookkeeping, contracting and business law, and quantity estimation. Other programs offered instruction in basic communication, marketing, portfolio assembly and human relations.

Primarily, the creation of the SRA Institute was the product of a developmental agenda that centered the impact of changes in the southern political economy on black life nationally. In a speech he gave at the University of North Carolina in 1967, entitled “Out-migration and Civil Disorder,” Blackwell argued that “the United States ... is denuding its open spaces of people, and crowding them together with an apparent result that both the cities and rural society are deteriorating.”⁷⁰ With the rural to urban migration showing no signs of slowing, Blackwell effective investment and antipoverty initiatives had to address both the root and branch of the problem. “If we spend billions on the cities, and if we ignore the rural scene,” Blackwell argued, “then the bigger the program the more it must be self defeating. It can only draw more and more people into the slums. The cities can’t stand that pressure ... the people can’t stand it either.”⁷¹ The key, Blackwell argued, was to reverse the equation: “People go where houses are built and jobs are available ... If we have rural development we can save the cities in the process.”⁷² As their first newsletter put it, “We of the Southern Rural Action Project are convinced that what we need in this country is a lot, of small, socially, culturally, and economically vibrant communities. Please, no more New York or Chicago.”⁷³

To develop such spaces and make them viable, Blackwell advanced a broader economic theory about the necessity of redirecting external sources of capital into black

⁷⁰ Blackwell, “Out-Migration,” 3.

⁷¹ “Black Land Loss: 60,000,000 Acres and Fading Fast,” *Southern Exposure* 2 (1974), 110.

⁷² Blackwell, quoted in “Black Land Loss,” 110.

⁷³ “Southern Rural Action Project: Progress Report No. 1.”

communities. African Americans, Blackwell argued, could make no progress or profit by selling products to their own, already disadvantaged communities. Crucially, Blackwell proposed developing:

factories that sell what they produce out of the community ... We're not interested in making something for the ghetto and intensifying competition over dollars that don't exist anyway. We'd rather make shirts for Sears, Roebuck and get a check from Chicago or New York because that's where the money is.⁷⁴

An implicit critique of the “fallacious theory” underlying Richard Nixon’s Black Capitalism initiative, Blackwell and SRA’s developmental vision was also a repudiation of consumption-driven models of economic empowerment.⁷⁵ Both, he concluded, ran the risk of African Americans becoming “a servant class and that prospect frightens me to no end.”⁷⁶ Rather, Blackwell argued for the integration of black business into the larger American flows of capital, drawing resources to poor communities in the rural South.⁷⁷ As Blackwell put it, he was “not too interested in people seeing the black-owned beer tavern or dry cleaner ... I want them to see the Black-owned garment factory in the backwoods of Georgia or just ordinary Mississippi folks running a factory that makes equipment for automobiles.”⁷⁸

Finally, Blackwell was a persistent and tenacious critic of the federal government’s role in the destruction of African American life in the rural South. As Blackwell noted in the late 1960s, USDA Secretary Orville Freeman’s claims to reduce food costs through enlightened policy had an insidious underbelly. “This means to me,”

⁷⁴ Blackwell, quoted in “Black Land Loss,” 110.

⁷⁵ “Southern Blacks Help Themselves,” *Ebony*, 87.

⁷⁶ “Southern Blacks Help Themselves,” *Ebony*, 87.

⁷⁷ “Southern Rural Action, Inc. on the Launching Pad,” *Congressional Record*, 16837.

⁷⁸ “Taking Care of Business: OMBE shows enterprising Blacks how to ‘bring home the bacon’,” *Ebony Magazine* (September 1978), 146.

Blackwell argued, “that he is destroying rural communities and people, increasing city slums, raising city taxes, and opening the gate for a monopoly takeover of rural America.”⁷⁹ Rather than the neutral result of “modernization,” “progress” or the natural course of a free market, the changes in the rural South could be explained by the liberal state’s faith in what Blackwell termed the “wrong farmers.” As such, Blackwell reframed southern outmigration as regional displacement. No longer interpreted as the natural outcome of progress, black people were the victims of a forced migration that directly implicated federal agricultural policy and gave black rural southerners little say in their own destiny.⁸⁰ Reiterating the NAACP’s concerns during the 1930s, Blackwell noted that unreconstructed racial discrimination within the USDA guaranteed that African Americans had no influence in policy decisions that bared directly on their lives and economic futures.⁸¹

LIVING IN THE COUNTRY AS REPRESENTATION

Though a student of political economy, Blackwell was deeply cognizant of the power of representation to shape—and possibly counteract—pejorative understandings of poverty, race and African American life. As many activists and intellectuals in the era of Black Power and the Moynihan Report came to understand, claims to development were not made in an ideological vacuum. During the 1960s, the growing salience of behavioral explanations for economic inequality forced organizations such as Southern Rural Action to reckon with the fact that, to a growing swathe of the liberal center, poverty was first

⁷⁹ Blackwell, “Out-Migration,” 10.

⁸⁰ For a reiteration of this point in the literature, see Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco and Rice Cultures since 1880* (University of Illinois Press, 1986); in particular, Blackwell identified the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1937, and the Farmers Home Administration Act of 1961 as policy culprits in this process. See Blackwell, “Out-Migration,” 12-15.

⁸¹ For Blackwell’s full catalogue of discrimination within the Georgia division of the USDA, see “Out-Migration,” 12-15.

and foremost a question of culture. Blackwell himself could be found explaining the impact of structural transformation in the rural South in such terms. As he argued in 1967, southern migrants to the urban North arrived “economically and educationally naked. Homesick. Culturally crippled. Ready to rake leaves where there are no trees; attend yards where there are no yards.”⁸² In post-Moynihan America, however, “culture” only grew in explanatory importance. Once inequality was apprehended in cultural terms, then it followed that moral revitalization—rather than economic redistribution—comprised the principal policy goal of (and only prerequisite to) anti-poverty work. And more perniciously, such an intellectual framework hardened understandings of African American communal and family life as a deviation from the assumed norms of American society. It would lead, by the end of the 1970s, to notions of a permanent “underclass” and the increasing power of conservative political forces to define how economic inequality would be understood, and responded to.⁸³

Black Power was certainly not immune from such developments. As “Living in the Country” makes abundantly clear, it was the black family that would be the principal beneficiary of SRA’s reconstruction of the rural economy. The pamphlet presents a narrative arc—a “before” SRA and an “after” SRA scene—which, through stock images, worked through an ideological landscape shaped by prevailing notions about the dysfunction of African American families. Such notions of dysfunction relied on a putative empiricism that catalogued black families’ “matriarchal” organization and their

⁸² Blackwell, “Out-Migration,” 3.

⁸³ For one of the earliest uses of the term “underclass,” see “The American Underclass,” *Time*, 29 August 1977, 14-15.

large “unmanageable” numbers of children. By logical extension, such families presumably relied on welfare payments to ameliorate their poverty.

Taken at face value, the pamphlet seemed to confirm these broader assumptions. Indeed, the families presented in “Living in the Country” are almost exclusively large, with groups of children commonly numbering anywhere between four and fifteen. Moreover, the family scenes are almost completely devoid of adult male figures. The men depicted are elderly, and clearly not imagined as the primary sources of labor that rural communities might draw upon to affect their own transformation.

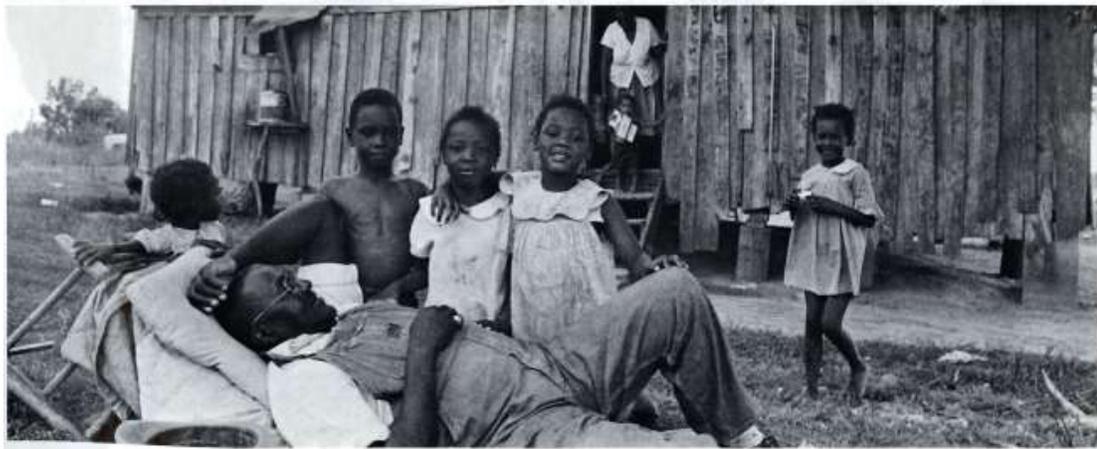


Figure 4.3. “These Children are Crazy about their Daddy.”⁸⁴

As such, the “traditional,” patriarchal sources of family authority are ill-defined. In most scenes, only women are present, presiding over groups of children eating and playing. In one other scene a man—presumably a father—lies prostrate on the floor, surrounded by children. A voice—perhaps that of the man’s wife—narrates the image, informing

⁸⁴ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 6.

viewers that the children “are crazy about their daddy and before his health broke down they kept him busy all the time.”⁸⁵

By contrast, the second half of the document completely transforms this image, supplanting a dysfunctional domestic landscape with images of strong, proud male workers engaged in productive employment, centering working-age men who pour cement, make bricks, assemble roof trusses and assemble the interiors of new houses.⁸⁶



Figure 4.4. “You don’t get so tired when you work for yourself.”⁸⁷

The final photographs of the pamphlet thus visually and symbolically reconstitute the foundations of both black community life and the rural family along gender-normative lines. By re-establishing the presence of male breadwinners, “Living in the Country” posits a teleology of racial and economic empowerment rooted, as the final photographs

⁸⁵ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 6.

⁸⁶ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 21-24.

⁸⁷ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 22.

of a new, catalogue-like family home suggest, in the process of establishing a functional black nuclear family where one there was none.

Further elaborating this point, “Living in the Country” assigned specific forms of gendered developmental labor to black men and women. Principally, the pamphlet exhorts African American men to assert their patriarchal prerogatives as productive wage earners. As a representative practice, this exhortation drew on older notions of racial uplift in African American intellectual life. Indeed, Blackwell and SRA’s framing of productive masculinity borrowed liberally from the rhetorical strategies of Booker T. Washington. As Washington himself wrote in his 1904 text *Working with the Hands*, “manliness is in large degree directly traceable to his skill and his experience in bearing industrial responsibility.”⁸⁸

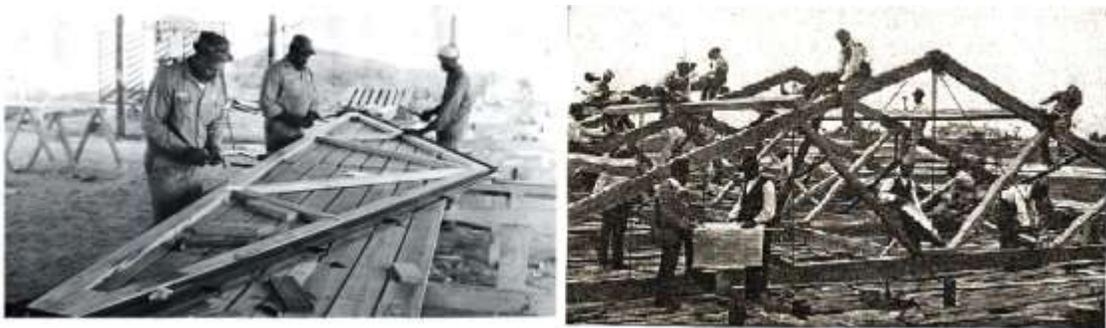


Figure 4.5. Depictions of black male labor, 1972 and 1904 ⁸⁹

Much was the same in “Living in the Country.” Both of the above photographs—one from 1904 and one from 1972—rhetorically identify the extent to which black economic

⁸⁸ Washington, *Working with the Hands: Being a Sequel to “Up from Slavery” Covering the Author’s Experiences in Industrial Training at Tuskegee* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1904), 82.

⁸⁹ Booker T. Washington, *Working with the Hands*, 84; SRA, “Living in the Country,” 21.

development would only be achieved through a recognition by male workers of the inherent dignity of labor. In doing so, “Living in the Country” avowed, much like Washington had decades earlier, a model of economic modernity founded on notions of both *rural* and *southern* black masculinity. By defining the rural South as a space of racial productivity, such images worked to counteract contemporaneous definitions of black masculinity premised on urbanity, radicalism and criminality. Indeed, such constructions had only been sharpened by Black Power politics which was frequently understood, and depicted in such terms.

But more immediately, Southern Rural Action’s emphasis on the rehabilitation of black male labor was also designed to address another animating feature of the Moynihan Report: the problem of black male unemployment. Not coincidentally, Daniel Moynihan had previously been employed by the Department of Labor during the Kennedy administration, where he developed a view of unemployment as a “family issue.” As Daniel Geary notes, Moynihan did much to consolidate a liberal commitment to full employment that “entailed strong assumptions about ideal families and gender roles.” Moreover, “Liberals sought to ‘universalize the ‘family wage’ model in which male breadwinners received wages adequate to support wives and children.”⁹⁰ Moreover, Moynihan went so far as to argue that legislation designed to raise black employment rates was desirable “even if we have to displace some females” from the workforce.⁹¹ All told, the Moynihan Report presented a model of anti-poverty work that necessitated policy interventions directed primarily toward the working lives of African American

⁹⁰ Daniel Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 22.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

men. As Kevin Mumford has argued, Moynihan's report framed black poverty as a "failure" of black masculinity, defined by a supposed inability to procure legitimate, empowering work.⁹² In this regard, Southern Rural Action's embrace of developmental wage labor framed issues of employment, poverty and gender in ways that reinforced ascendant liberal assumptions.

Yet in celebrating the transformative potential of black male labor "Living in the County" simultaneously obscured the fact that, in the rural South, women's participation in the wage labor work was a crucial component of their families' income. Indeed, black women's real-world role as wage earners is not documented at all in the pages of "Living in the Country." Instead, spheres of male and female developmental labor are sharply demarcated. "Women's work" is depicted in domestic terms: cleaning the house, cooking food and supervising children. The absence of women wage earners from the pamphlet is particularly noticeable given the extent to which a major component of SRA's efforts was revitalizing economic spaces in which male workers had often abandoned for either cities or positions in migratory farm labor elsewhere in the South. Furthermore, "Living in the Country" elides the reality that many of the light manufacturing initiatives established by SRA employed predominantly women.

Such a framing of SRA's work was in some senses discordant, given that Blackwell had long considered the fate of working mothers in the rural South to be a particular priority for a more holistic, socially effective civil rights activism. As Blackwell argued in 1965, "In the South, a great price is exacted in the form of social ostracization of young women that become mothers out of wedlock." With pregnancies at

⁹² Mumford, "Untangling Pathology," 57.

an early age often denying women access to education, Blackwell argued that “any possible contribution that she might have made to society is also lost.”⁹³ Moreover, local residents themselves often framed the potential of SRA projects in terms of their ability to economically empower rural women. As the Rev. Gilmore of Greene County, Alabama, put it, “Great women like these—in some instances they’re not heard of, but they’re great—[and] are going to change things.”⁹⁴

The elision of black women workers from the pages of “Living in the Country,” however, also suggests the ways in which the politically volatile issue of public welfare shaped the representational contours of black developmental efforts. Though it would later become a standard shibboleth of conservative attacks on the liberal state, anxieties about welfare were generated by the liberal center during the period. In 1964, for instance, Daniel Moynihan had argued that a reliance on federal welfare—particularly AFDC dollars—was, as he put it bluntly, “rotting” the poor. Moreover, Moynihan resisted gender-specific welfare policies such as day care facilities that would allow women to enter the workforce. For Moynihan, such state-sponsored privileges would ultimately deepen class and racial inequalities. As he put it, “day care centers institutionalize the colored maid and subsidize middle-class households that enjoy such luxuries.”⁹⁵ It was not the state’s responsibility, Moynihan argued, to supplant a role designated for African American men. In this regard, the representational practices of Southern Rural Action followed the conflicted, gender-proscriptive logics that

⁹³ Blackwell, “A Report on a Visit to Selma, Alabama, Along with Proposed Programs,” 10 May 1965, King Papers, general correspondence.

⁹⁴ “Community Day in Plains,” *Action Audit*, Vol. 1, No. 2, February, 1974, SSP, 21.

⁹⁵ Moynihan, quoted in Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights*, 26.

increasingly guided liberal anti-poverty work and proved increasingly hostile to federal welfare policies.

At the same time, black developmental efforts positioned themselves as *alternatives* to state-centered anti-poverty work. As the issue of welfare became increasingly understood in racial terms, Southern Rural Action positioned its efforts—and its claims to be able to achieve development—by asserting the ways in which even the habits and lives of economically marginalized African Americans could be transformed through “self-help” and productive, morally regenerative labor. Blackwell was unequivocal about his fear of welfare reliance, noting that he wanted “our people to turn away from the traditional welfare concept ... we want them to demand real opportunity.”⁹⁶ On other occasions, Blackwell was no less emphatic, arguing that “Welfare and support payments are not a prudent investment of our tax dollars. Minority business development is.” Ultimately, he noted his hope that through private enterprise African Americans could be removed from “welfare rolls permanently.”⁹⁷ In such a regard, the work of SRA represented what might be termed a “third way” that, through an obscuring of women’s work and its sympathetic depiction of African American domestic life, sought ways to justify black economic empowerment without condemning female welfare recipients.⁹⁸

In particular, the attention “Living in the Country” gives to black domestic life further suggests SRA’s efforts to make developmental claims through normative

⁹⁶ Groh, *The Black Migration*, 105.

⁹⁷ Blackwell, quoted in “OMBE Director Testifies to Need For Private Sector, Government and Public to Share Burdens,” *Louisville Defender*, 4 May 1978; *Jobs and Prices in Atlanta, Hearing on 8 December Before the Joint Economic Committee*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., (1975), 120.

⁹⁸ Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights*, 26.

frameworks. Firstly, the photo-essay presents rural women as scions of domesticity. Undoubtedly, the pamphlet's representational strategies center black women's identities as dutiful mothers deeply invested in the health of their children. As a number of scholars have contended, black domestic spaces have often functioned as sites of ideological spectacle, "confirming" their pathological deviance while reinforcing white America's normative (and exclusionary) notions of family and citizenship.⁹⁹ Turning this logic on its head, "Living in the Country" presents a vision of the black family as a place where dignity and striving have not been fully extinguished. Nonetheless, profound material strictures still remained. One photograph showing a mother feeding an infant while another child sits nearby, eating from the floor. The photograph's caption reads: "I know I shouldn't let him eat off the floor but I can't throw that food away."¹⁰⁰ Despite their best efforts, the pamphlet reveals unequivocally that such women are—despite their best efforts—frequently unable to properly feed, clothe and house their children. Though still objects of spectacle, "Living in the Country" presented women and mothers struggling to fulfill the norms of the dominant society. As one woman pictured notes, "What would I like to have? Well, I want a nice house, I want enough for my children to eat all the time, I want to have some money put up for when sickness comes."¹⁰¹

Finally, "Living in the Country" suggests an attempt to offer a rebuttal to contemporaneous accusations of such families' "matriarchal" organization by highlighting African American women's investment in displays of sexual normalcy. One photograph depicts a woman in front of her mirror. As the pamphlet narrates, "A woman

⁹⁹ Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations*, 18.

¹⁰⁰ SRA, "Living in the Country," 9.

¹⁰¹ SRA, "Living in the Country," 10.

gotta look good to her man or she can't keep him."¹⁰² Crucially, the image suggests the ways in which economic deprivation—the inability to participate in consumptive practices—fundamentally imperils the stability of the nuclear family. Finally, the photograph and caption dismantles the equivalence between black domesticity and unredeemable dysfunction.

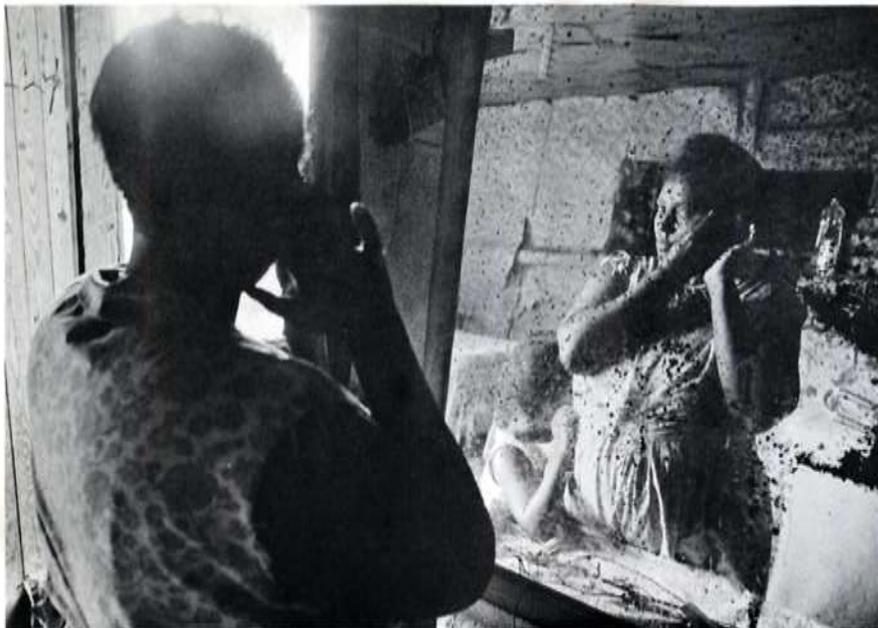


Figure 4.6. “A Woman Gotta Look Good to her Man.”¹⁰³

Rather, “Living in the Country” clearly identifies domestic space as a critical site of empowerment where, despite all the countervailing pressures and limitations, intimacy and personal dignity might finally be achieved.

Such a framing of SRA’s representative practices allows for a far clearer understanding of the ways in which notions of gender and sexuality intersected with the material and ideological dimensions of black developmentalism. Indeed, “privacy” had

¹⁰² SRA, “Living in the Country,” 14.

¹⁰³ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 14.

become fundamentally politicized in an era defined by growing attacks on so-called welfare dependency. As scholarship on the Welfare Rights movement has noted, black women were often subject to harassment by functionaries of the state, with welfare “detectives” conducting midnight raids that would show little regard for the privacy of recipients, searching through dirty clothes hampers and refrigerators while waking sleeping children with flashlights in the search for adult, wage-earning males.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the organization’s commitment to provide low-income housing was indicative of the ways in which SRA attempted to establish, in concrete terms, a landscape of dignity, intimacy and privacy for rural residents. Indeed, the issue of housing became the site where the political imperatives of sexual normativity, constructions of black domestic life and economic empowerment were most closely wedded. Suburban-style, rural housing built by SRA would become central to the construction, as one critic notes, of “hyperprivate” environments “within which the vulnerability of intimacy is again possible.”¹⁰⁵

THE PRIVATE HOUSEHOLD AS BLACK MODERNITY

No aspect of SRA’s efforts to create spaces of black privacy were more important than the organization’s construction of quality, low-cost housing in the rural South. One of the many substantive demands made by activists during the Black Power-era centered on this issue, which was a particularly acute problem in the urban North where discriminatory red-lining practices and community mobilization in affluent white

¹⁰⁴ Nick Kotz and Mary Lynn Kotz, *A Passion For Equality: George A. Wiley and the Movement* (New York: Norton: 1977), 220-221.

¹⁰⁵ Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations*, 20.

residential areas helped keep African Americans within the invisible walls of the ghetto.¹⁰⁶

A lack of adequate housing was no less of a problem in the rural South, however.

Blackwell testified before a number of congressional commissions in the early 1970s in an attempt to draw attention to the problem.¹⁰⁷ By the early 1970s, SRA had established over four hundred units across the region in an attempt to address this issue.¹⁰⁸

Nonetheless, it is critical to interrogate the significance of the form of housing deemed appropriate by Blackwell and Southern Rural Action—single family homes made of bricks and mortar. At one level, the decision to construct such homes revealed how the optics of the built environment were central to SRA’s efforts to signal that its development work was commensurate with liberal, American values. As the architectural critic Leslie Weisman has argued, single-family homes have functioned symbolically as primary index of full citizenship.¹⁰⁹ In the rural South, however, the question of housing was embedded a complex of ideas about black domestic life that was inseparable from the material and historical legacies of slavery. As W.E.B. Du Bois observed in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, many rural African Americans continued to reside in dwellings that had housed their enslaved ancestors, while other has rebuilt similar structures on the sites of the old. “All over the face of the land,” Du Bois wrote:

¹⁰⁶ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 33-88, 181-258; Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women’s Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 155-228.

¹⁰⁷ For a sampling of the commissions Blackwell appeared before, see *Rural Housing Oversight on Rural Housing Programs: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Affairs of the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs* (19-21 November, 1974); *Jobs and Prices in Atlanta: Hearings Before the Joint Economic Committee* (8 December 1975).

¹⁰⁸ “Southern Blacks Help Themselves,” 85.

¹⁰⁹ Leslie Kanes Weisman, *Discrimination By Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 114.

is the one room cabin ... nearly always old and bare, built of rough boards, and neither plastered nor ceiled ... Now and then one may find such a cabin kept scrupulously neat ... but the majority are dirty and dilapidated, smelling of eating and sleeping, poorly ventilated, and anything but homes.”¹¹⁰

SRA’s focus on the necessity of bricks of mortar as a replacement for the wooden “shotgun” shacks inhabited by many rural African Americans suggests Blackwell’s belief in the relationship between African Americans’ “progress,” “modernity” and their residential arrangements. Indeed, “Living in the Country” deliberately frames the economic transformation affected by SRA in terms of housing, symbolically replacing wooden shacks in the pamphlet’s opening images toward suburban-style, brick, single-family homes at the conclusion.



Figure 4.7. Housing transformed by Southern Rural Action¹¹¹

Moreover, the pamphlet’s visual language reprises two earlier representations of black economic modernity. In his 1911 publication, *My Larger Education: Being Chapters from my Experience*, Booker T. Washington would juxtapose images of schoolhouses: one single-room log cabin, and another two—much larger, this time—made from

¹¹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 101.

¹¹¹ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 12, 29.

gleaming white wood panels.¹¹² A similar rhetorical strategy had been used by William Edward James, a rather less well known contemporary of Washington's. In *Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt*, his 1918 publication, James contrasted existing forms of rural housing with those of a "Snow Hill Graduate," showing a well-appointed white house, situated within a large plot of land.¹¹³ Thus Blackwell, in a manner strikingly similar manner as Washington and James, over half a century before, turned to commonly accepted standards of material health and success—and implicitly highlighted their absence in many African American communities—to make claims about the potential of rural African Americans to move into the mainstream of American life and to avow the potential of economic development to eviscerate the material, social and psychological legacies of slavery.

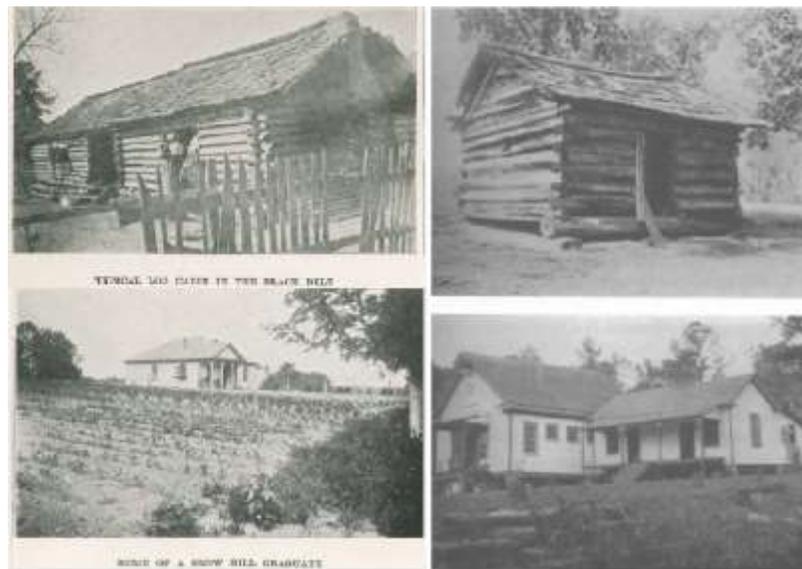


Figure 4.8. Antecedents. ¹¹⁴

¹¹² Booker T. Washington, *My Larger Education: Being Chapters from my Experience* (New York, NY: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1911), 164.

¹¹³ William James, *Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt* (Boston, MA: The Cornhill Company, 1918), 72.

¹¹⁴ Booker T. Washington, *My Larger Education*, 164.

The legacy of Booker T. Washington was one Blackwell—and a number of his contemporaries doing similar working in the rural South—publically embraced during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, Blackwell’s public description of the South—referring to it as his “beloved” region, directly reprised Washington’s phraseology in his seminal “Atlanta Compromise” speech.¹¹⁵ As Blackwell himself noted, despite growing up viewing Washington as an “Uncle Tom,” he believed SRA was doing, “with dignity,” what Washington had attempted to accomplish.¹¹⁶ More than evidence for a retreat to a conservative politics, however, the interest in the language of empowerment employed by the Wizard of Tuskegee suggests the extent to which Blackwell wished to locate his modernizing political project within the discursive landscape of the region and its agricultural, “agrarian” inheritance. Like Washington’s advocacy of race relations, the rhetorical strategy attempted to minimize, if not eradicate accusations of a pro-race politics.

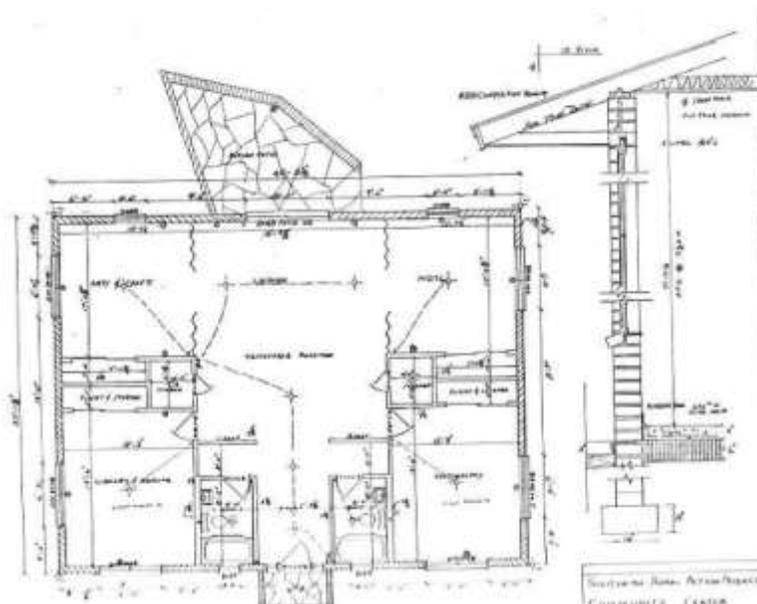
Beyond the question of exteriors, rural housing represented a critical material and representational issue because of its historic link to racist discourse. As the historian Gwendolyn Wright has argued, African American residences generally—and black housing interiors more specifically—have proven a critical site for inscribing and reproducing “dominant white attitudes about black domesticity, black sexuality, and black standards of character and cleanliness.”¹¹⁷ SRA clearly considered that domestic spaces were one of the crucial sites for the public redefinition of African American

¹¹⁵ See Blackwell, “Outmigration and Civil Disorder.” Booker T. Washington, “1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech,” 18 September 1895. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/39/>, accessed online 27 February 2016.

¹¹⁶ Blackwell, quoted in “Southern Blacks Help Themselves,” 86.

¹¹⁷ Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 57.

family life. Early photographs from “Living in the Country” indicate that rural houses had little demarcation between areas of cooking, cleaning or sleeping. The transformation that occurs within the pages of the pamphlet, however, replaces this “disorder” with a new, orderly interior organization. One accompanying quote, taken from a local viewing one of SRA’s new houses, makes this point clearly: “Lord, Maggie, come look—separate places for eating and sleeping.”¹¹⁸ Later photographs, showing the model for SRA’s housing are very different: the interiors are clean, with wide open spaces displaying sleek, sharp edges. In the background of the frame, a long corridor leads likely to a set of bedrooms. The centerpiece of this space is the kitchen, situated within an open plan layout that allows other spaces of habitation, such as the living room, to be visible to anyone preparing food. Indeed, SRA grant proposals often included architectural plans, indicating the political importance the organization accorded to ideas about the organization of space and its relationship to racial development.



¹¹⁸ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 27.

Figure 4.9. Architectural Plans for SRA Community Center¹¹⁹

Above all else, SRA's housing work was underpinned by programs that could make houses affordable. By providing financial mechanisms to support mortgage payments, it was clear that Blackwell and SRA considered property *ownership* to be a critical component of post-civil rights black citizenship.¹²⁰ Blackwell himself framed the imperative toward ownership, both material and symbolic, against the social and economic problems of the urban North. As he reminded a federal commission on housing in 1974, "every major city has numerous public buildings that cost taxpayers that now stand empty because the families that they were designed for feel no attachment to those houses and no responsibility for them."¹²¹ Indeed, SRA housing developments provided a deliberate counter-point to the forms of public housing more commonly employed as a way to solve housing shortages in the urban North: row-houses and tower blocks. Such public housing developments, by virtue of their functionalism and economies of scale often reproduced rather than minimized the inequalities they were designed to address.¹²² And while echoing the rhetoric of communal control common to many anti-poverty initiatives during the War on Poverty era, the imperative to ownership at heart of SRA housing projects suggests that Blackwell perceived a relationship between the violence

¹¹⁹ SRA, "A Proposal Submitted to the Ford Foundation to Conduct an Enterprise and Community Development Program in the Southeastern United States," (copy in author's possession).

¹²⁰ Blackwell was not alone in this regard. As one female housing activist in the North noted, "we think home ownership is the only answer for poor people. They have to be in control of their community." Bertha Gilke, as interviewed by Gerda R. Werkle, "Women as Urban Developers," *Women and Environments* 5:2 (Summer 1982), 16.

¹²¹ Blackwell, quoted in *Oversight on Rural Housing Programs: Hearings on 19-21 November Before the Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Affairs of the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs*, 93rd Cong., 2nd. sess., (1974).

¹²² Weisman, *Discrimination By Design*, 58.

(of the communal or pathological kind) that characterized many urban centers in the late 1960s and the un-propertied status of most African American urban residents. As he put it, “You’re not really developing ... unless you can get people to say *this is my community*. You can put up 50,000 houses and if they [residents] don’t feel like it’s theirs, they’ll be torn up.”¹²³

By contrast, SRA made sure that local people were instrumental to the process of construction of single family homes, providing both work and, Blackwell believed, a deep sense of attachment to the finished product. Embracing “self-help” housing, Concrete brick and roof truss factories staffed by locals composed the basic materials for new homes, while resources were pooled to create credit unions capable of funding mortgages affordable to men and women existing below the poverty line.

In defining property-ownership as central to black development and citizenship claims, the work of Blackwell and SRA once again converged with the proscriptions of Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Though eventually left out of the text of the *Case for National Action*, a memo penned by Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz to President Lyndon Johnson indicated Moynihan’s belief that the problem of the inner cities could potentially involve the establishment of family housing for African Americans in the suburbs.¹²⁴ It was a position with which Randolph Blackwell would surely have agreed.

¹²³ Blackwell, quoted in *Oversight on Rural Housing*.

¹²⁴ Estes, *I am a Man!*, 108.



Figure 4.10. Black Suburban Modernity¹²⁵

IMAGINING RACIAL FUTURES

As Blackwell noted on numerous occasions, his project of rural development was not simply comprised of amelioration for existing black residents of the South, but rather was frequently framed in grander, explicitly futurist terms. As he argued in 1967, the South “has been a land of beauty and pathos. I look forward, in my own lifetime, to it becoming one of beauty and prosperity, and a home where [people] can find a future for ... [their] children.”¹²⁶ In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, this future of simultaneous racial and regional regeneration was increasingly imperiled by an outmigration that tracked generational lines. In the assessment of one local woman, Emma Harris, a lack of economic and cultural opportunity was at the heart of the continuing population exodus: “As soon as they come of age—18—they’re going away

¹²⁵ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 29.

¹²⁶ Blackwell, “Out-Migration and Civil Disorder,” 4.

from here ... There's nothing to keep them here. My man can't give them what they need on the few dollars he makes at the sawmill."¹²⁷

In "Living in the Country" SRA used the future of a rhetorical black child to link—in culturally legitimate terms—the psychological and cultural consequences of material deprivation. As the introduction to the photo essay argued, "the lives of children become scarred forever. We are compelling our young to learn filth before they learn beauty, to hate everything around them before they learn to respect themselves."¹²⁸ More than anything, this natalist politics represented an attempt to link the fate of the rural South to the policy questions that liberals faced in the aftermath of the urban uprisings of the late 1960s. The human consequences of rural deprivation, as SRA and Blackwell had argued ever since the late 1960s, were but a journey away from the doorstep, street-corners and "ghettos" of the urban North. No apolitical idiom, the imperiled black child worked to humanize the issues of economics, culture and race that coursed through contemporary understandings of poverty. As one teenage male, pictured passing out of a doorway from a barren bedroom, notes "Once I get out of here in the morning, I don't even look back. I don't even think about it until it's time to come back in."¹²⁹

¹²⁷ "The Great Migration: A Crisis for Both the City and Rural America," *New York Daily News* in NSCF, 1:24, 10.

¹²⁸ SRA, "Living in the Country," 3.

¹²⁹ SRA, "Living in the Country," 5.



Figure 4.11. “When I Grow Up, I’m...”¹³⁰

Another photograph’s caption, speaking for the collective children captured in various moods on their front porch, suggests that their future lives are an open-ended question:

“When I grow up, I’m ...”¹³¹

By the mid-1970s, Blackwell and Southern Rural Action had become a *cause célèbre* of a new, post-civil rights black political class that included Coretta Scott King, Maynard Jackson and Andrew Young.¹³² SRA had also received praise from a number of prominent conservative sources, including Richard Nixon, Republican Senator Marlow Cook and two consistent foes of civil rights: George Wallace and Eugene Talmadge.¹³³ Far from embarrassed by the right’s embrace of his particular form of civil rights activism, Blackwell derived satisfaction from the way SRA had effectively navigated

¹³⁰ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 7.

¹³¹ SRA, “Living in the Country,” 7.

¹³² Andrew Young, 93rd Cong., 1st. sess., *Congressional Record*, 23 May 1973, 16836.

¹³³ Richard Nixon to Randolph Blackwell, 23 January 1970, *SRA Institute Bulletin*, SSP.

between the poles of an increasingly partisan, ideological and conservative American politics. As Blackwell put it to the *National Catholic Reporter*, “If we can reach people with that wide range of opinion ... I think Southern Rural Action is on the way to something big.”¹³⁴ There was certainly truth in that assessment. In 1965, before SRA had ever set foot in the South, only seven black-owned manufacturing businesses could claim to employ more than twenty-five people.¹³⁵ By 1973, SRA’s accounts documented that the organization had facilitated over twenty million dollars of cashflow between their various projects.¹³⁶

By this point in the mid-1970s, Blackwell’s language had shifted somewhat. This was no longer the moment of community action, the War on Poverty or ascendant American liberalism. Increasingly, Blackwell made his case primarily in the language of business and free enterprise. As he put it, “we’re talking about the opportunity of profits that are made in the traditional American way.”¹³⁷ In an effort to deflect potential criticism about public involvement in black enterprise efforts, Blackwell pointed out the massive levels of federal spending already delegated to subsidize numerous forms of private enterprise. As he put it, “we build highway systems which subsidize the trucking industry; we build airports to subsidize the airline industry ... [but when] you talk about subsidizing people in rural America and owning a factory that would get them off welfare rolls permanently ... The answer is, ‘Oh, we couldn’t afford to subsidize private industry.’”¹³⁸

¹³⁴ “Agency Creates Jobs for Rural Poor,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 9 November 1973, 13.

¹³⁵ “A Proposal Submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor by Southern Rural Action Inc.,” SSP, 21.

¹³⁶ For a full financial breakdown of SRA related investments, see Appendix A. Cited in “Southern Rural Action, Inc. on the Launching Pad.”

¹³⁷ Blackwell, quoted in “OMBE Director Testifies,” 120.

¹³⁸ Blackwell, quoted in “OMBE Director Testifies,” 120.

This shift in language was also the product of a man fighting for survival. Paradoxically, Blackwell's growing prominence at the national level was counterbalanced by SRA's increasingly fraught existence at the local level. The most persistent problem SRA faced was a lack of financial assistance. Before the Hearing on Rural Housing in 1974, Blackwell informed the committee that there were "numerous organizations functioning in rural America almost at their own expense doing public service work, and because of the nature of our present-day economy these organizations are threatened with the possibility of having to go out of existence."¹³⁹ Visiting SRA headquarters in the early 1970s, a journalist noted the "threadbare" nature of operations, with a staff that at times was comprised of only Blackwell and a temporary secretary. During SRA's lifespan, it often relied on limited private donations and technical assistance from a diverse group of organisations, including the American Friends Service Committee, the National Sharecroppers Fund, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, the National Council of Negro Women and the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.¹⁴⁰ In addition to the lecture fees Blackwell was able to earn, the organisation's biggest source of financial assistance was a grant of \$212,000 from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). As SRA staffer Fred Stokes put it, the organisation was fighting a constantly rising tide; "When we first started no one was talking about the rural. We've held this thing together with baling wire, and we're going to continue the baling wire approach until someone recognizes the effort we're making."¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Blackwell, *Jobs and Prices in Atlanta*, 64.

¹⁴⁰ "SRA Annual Report," 10.

¹⁴¹ Frederick Stokes, quoted in "Black Land Loss," 111.

The financial plight of SRA was certainly not helped by Blackwell's refusal to appropriate any of the profits produced by the enterprises he established. If one worked with the organisation, the investment in start-up costs came with no strings attached. As Blackwell explained,

Sure, it would be logical to do it [run the organisation] on the basis that some small percentage of the profits of these enterprises would go to help defray Southern Rural's financial problems, but you go into these communities and begin talking about taking back part of the money and people think you're out to hustle again. These people have been hustled enough already.¹⁴²

But as Blackwell continued to remind interested parties, meaningful change could be effected on a relatively meagre budget. As Frederick Stokes would put it succinctly, "We don't have a Marshall Plan and we don't think we cured the housing need anywhere ... but we have demonstrated it can be done."¹⁴³

It would not be enough, however. By the late 1970s, SRA was attempting to borrow money from the Community Services Administration—a later iteration of the OEO—simply to cover administrative expenses.¹⁴⁴ With Blackwell no longer directly running operations (having accepted a post in the Department of Commerce) Frederick Stokes was left with the responsibility of righting a sinking ship. Auditors working for the CSA began to bear down on SRA, pursuing a \$500 dollar accounting discrepancy and minor administrative technicalities.¹⁴⁵ Sure enough, Southern Rural Action would soon be no more.

¹⁴² Blackwell, quoted in "Southern Blacks Help Themselves," *Ebony*, 80.

¹⁴³ Frederick Stokes, quoted in "Black Land Loss," 111.

¹⁴⁴ "Frederick Stokes to Mr. Walker," 8 September 1977, Record Group 381, Community Services Administration records (hereafter CSA).

¹⁴⁵ Gary L. Furlong, "Letter to Southern Rural Action," 28 July 1977, RG 381, CSA.

In some senses, the work of Randolph Blackwell and SRA fits Adolph Reed's characterization of a broad reorientation in black political activism toward "'economic development' and technocratic models of service provision" that absorbed numerous activists into "developing apparatus of race relations management."¹⁴⁶ By the late 1970s Blackwell had been installed by the administration of President Jimmy Carter as head of the Department of Commerce's Office of Minority Business Enterprise. Though he remained a now-insider critic of the Black Capitalism, by the late 1970s Blackwell's language had softened, framing federally-sponsored black business development as being about "opportunity of profits that are made in the traditional American way."¹⁴⁷

Heading a federal office would be a dramatically different challenge to grassroots work in the rural South. As the *Afro-American Tribune*, a Washington newspaper noted, the nation's capital was a city of "politicians and political-minded bureaucrats, a city of pseudo-scholars who have made or broken black programs with their typewriters, and a city where change and thrust is measured more in speeches than in results."¹⁴⁸ But perhaps most importantly, Blackwell's appointment to head the OMBE had also installed a leading critic of the existing paradigm of black economic development in the federal bureaucracy. Taking up the challenge posed—rhetorically, at least—by the Carter administration, Blackwell attempted to reform the long-floundering agency and fundamentally alter its approach to the problem of minority business development. As Blackwell saw it, the OMBE had to move away from assisting small-scale, "mom and pop" enterprises to sound, fiscally responsible businesses with major growth potential.

¹⁴⁶ Adolph Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 1.

¹⁴⁷ *Jobs and Prices in Atlanta*, 120.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

By funding only limited enterprises in urban centres, Blackwell argued, the OMBE had curtailed any meaningful capital accumulation within the African American community. As he put it, “minorities have been locked into the one-shot type of businesses—laundromats, cleaners.” “Surely these have to be a part of the whole picture,” Blackwell noted, “but every aspect [of economic development]—including becoming part of the large corporations—must be utilized.”¹⁴⁹

Crucially, Blackwell argued that minority business had to be tied to emerging industries where the opportunity to gain an economic foothold was more realistic. As Blackwell told *Ebony* in 1978,

It’s too late, in the main, for minorities to be talking about getting into the airplane building business. The industry is too mature and we’re not likely to handle the kind of money that would let us into airplane building or owning steel mills ... but there are certain industries that are just breaking and we want to get in on the ground floor and grow with them. Energy is wide open, and, in cities like Atlanta and Miami the growth potential for minorities is greater than it is in, say, New York, where everything is wrapped up.¹⁵⁰

As Blackwell saw it, his agency had a responsibility to plan for future economic developments that could assist minority communities. As he put it, “We [the OMBE] ought to be able to look at [the] economy, determine its direction and encourage business to go in that direction.”¹⁵¹ Assistance would be more valuable, Blackwell argued, if the OMBE could accurately inform potential entrepreneurs that “this is the coming economic area and you ought to get in on it while the money you have in your pocket will allow you ... because if you wait 20 years from now, it is going to be such a mature industry that you will not have the kind of money to get in on it.”¹⁵² For too long, Blackwell

¹⁴⁹ “Solve Race Issue, Federal Official Urges Businessmen,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 March 1978.

¹⁵⁰ “Taking Care of Business,” *Ebony*, 146.

¹⁵¹ “OMBE Director Touts Imagination,” *Ravenswood Post*, Vol. 27, No. 17, 18 October 1978.

¹⁵² Blackwell, *about...time*, August 1977.

argued, had the OMBE been content to lend merely assistance to existing minority businesses that were struggling to stay afloat. Rather than sinking money into economic sectors with low profit ceilings, the agency had to be more concerned with creating a durable capital base for African Americans. “I happen to believe that all of it is a matter of creating equity ... successful industry means jobs and that is good,” Blackwell argued, “but minorities owning a share in growth industries—that is the way you change the economic status of minorities in this country.”¹⁵³

For Blackwell, two interrelated areas—new technology and energy—could become the heartbeat of a revitalized minority business community. During the gas crisis of the late 1970s, it seemed an extremely logical avenue to pursue. As Blackwell put it, “Look, for example, at the booming price of petroleum from overseas. Find out if alcohol fuel can be manufactured in this country, from grain grown by Americans, on American farms, processed in American plants and distributed by American workers. If so, reduce the country’s trade deficit, provide jobs for Americans, build a new market for farmers, and go into ethanol production.”¹⁵⁴ For Blackwell, exploring new energy possibilities was part of a broader imperative for black businessmen to be at the forefront of innovation. Addressing a community meeting of local businessmen in East Palo Alto, Blackwell pleaded with listeners to “Turn your imagination and creativity loose ... If not, we’ll [minorities] close out the 20th century in the same shape we’re in now or worse.”¹⁵⁵

By April of 1979, however, Blackwell had been re-appointed—or rather, demoted—to a new position as the head of the specially created Office of Minority

¹⁵³ “OMBE Serves the Minority Community,” *Afro-American Tribune*, 24 December 1977.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ “OMBE Director Touts Imagination,” *Ravenswood Post*, Vol. 27, No. 17, 18 October 1978.

Enterprise Program Development (OMPED), an agency that was to be headquartered in Atlanta. As Pauline Schneider noted, Blackwell was re-assigned as a means to avoid causing an unnecessary confrontation with his steadfast supporters amongst the black political class. Indeed, a powerful lobby, including Coretta Scott King, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young and Dorothy Height had formed what Schneider termed the “Randy Blackwell Committee,” a pressure group designed to see the civil rights veteran remain in his job. As they wrote in a petition to President Carter, “we ... are greatly interested in the “growth industries” theory of economic development ... [and] we are planning a national mobilization so that you can have the benefit of knowing the widespread support that exists in the country for the continuation of this office.”¹⁵⁶ Following a rocky, and largely ineffectual stay in Washington, D.C., however, Blackwell died on May 21, 1981, in Atlanta. As his *New York Times* appropriately headlined its obituary, Blackwell had been above all else a “Leader in Helping Poor Blacks in the South.”¹⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

It is impossible to understand the career of Randolph Blackwell—and the evolution of black developmentalism—without giving due attention to the relationship between the public, “political” dimensions of African American life and the ideologically-freighted dimensions of working class African Americans’ domestic practices. As this chapter has argued, the discursive power of the Moynihan Report’s definition of African Americans’ social and cultural dysfunction (the explanatory variable for their economic submergence) forced both civil rights activists and proponents of

¹⁵⁶ The National Committee To Save the Office of Minority Enterprise Program Development to Jimmy Carter, August 1980, ROLM.

¹⁵⁷ “Randolph T. Blackwell, a Leader in Helping Poor Blacks in the South,” *New York Times*, 23 May 1981.

Black Power into a dialogue with fundamentally racialized prescriptions about the appropriate form of African American family organization. In many senses, the work of SRA can certainly be described as a spirited defense of the black family, one that drew attention to the resilience, love and compassion that such units (however “dysfunctionally” organized) were capable of sustaining. Given the extent of Blackwell’s intellectual investment in political economy as an explanation of black rural poverty, however, his rhetorical substitution and exposure of black family life signposts the power of emergent behavioral explanations for African Americans’ inability to take advantage of a now-theoretically open democracy in the post-civil rights era.

At the same time, however, the efforts of Southern Rural Action also demonstrate the discursive prison-house of liberalism, and the Faustian bargains that have often characterized modern black empowerment projects. As Thomas C. Holt has argued liberalism—as both a political and *moral* project—has historically relied upon the demonization of the so-called aberrant, dysfunctional and pathological groups of people unable or unwilling to conform to its imperatives.¹⁵⁸ Indeed, the history of Blackwell and Southern Rural Action demonstrates the political futility (or impossibility) of using the language of liberalism in any truly oppositional sense. As neoconservative projects of welfare reform and law and order initiatives have proven, the “pathological” black body continued to function as an ideological measuring stick for effective participation in a liberal society. In many senses, Blackwell and SRA’s work in the rural South, rather than challenging the assumptions of the liberal political project, reified its central, racialized assumptions and maintained the notion that the standard of “modernity” for African

¹⁵⁸ Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, xix-xx.

Americans would continue to be arbitrated by a liberal center in many senses invested (however informally) in black people's marginalization.

CHAPTER 5

Shadows of the Sunbelt

Industrial Development, Small Town Revitalization and the Future of the South in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta

On January 31, 1966, a small, yet resolute group of around fifty locals and civil rights workers converged on a deactivated Air Force base, located on the outskirts of Greenville, Mississippi. Braving both the cold Delta morning and the presence of guards, the protesters gained access to a barracks and, much to the chagrin of the arriving base commander, steadfastly refused to leave. To be sure, there was an element of desperation in the men and women's decision to occupy federal property, one borne principally of the manifold ills afflicting the Delta's agricultural economy. First among many contributing factors was the rapid mechanization of cotton production in the Mississippi Delta which, by the mid-1960s, had almost run its course.¹ In its wake, the reorganization of plantation agriculture and rural labor relations had produced widespread unemployment among farm workers which, compounded by the inadequacy of both local and federal relief efforts and the vicissitudes of an unusually frigid Mississippi winter, had pushed many black Delta residents to the brink.²

Undoubtedly, the occupation could be viewed—as many weary, if not outright antagonistic local whites assuredly did—as just another civil rights demonstration. For journalist Leon Howell, whose 1969 account *Freedom City* documented both the

¹ Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 334-360; Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 155-183, 239-255.

² "Mississippi Air Base Occupied By Negroes in Search of Jobs," *New York Times*, 1 Feb 1966.

occupation and its political aftermath, the protest was about something quite prosaic: the dire need for adequate shelter and food. Yet it was not solely desperation that motivated the claiming of the deactivated base. In fact, the group's actions were the product of the deliberations of a 700-person strong meeting held two days previously, and many present, such as Owen Brooks of the Delta Ministry, had deep connections to the Mississippi freedom struggle. When confronted by the base commander, Lieutenant Colonel George B. Andrews, the protesters produced a collective statement—agreed upon at the earlier meeting and now presented under the moniker of the “Poor People’s Conference”—that called attention to the reality of human deprivation in the Delta, while emphasizing locals’ potential for self-help. “We are here,” the statement announced, “because we are hungry and cold and we have no jobs or land. We don’t want charity. We are willing to work for ourselves if given a chance.”³

As trenchantly, the protesters had arrived on base prepared to call attention to what they considered the absurdity of significant infrastructure—evident in the presence of the 2000 acre, manicured base itself—laying idle in the midst of one of the nation’s most impoverished, and economically dysfunctional regions. On the one hand, the protesters framed their claims for assistance in the idiom of economic populism. “Whose side are you on,” they asked of President Lyndon B. Johnson, “the poor people or the millionaires?” Yet this rejoinder should not be understood solely as the spasmodic expression of a futile politics; simultaneously, the protestors had adopted—albeit in a more subtle vein—the language of growth-oriented liberalism. Indeed, the very decision

³ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 366-368. Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 104-105; Leon Howell, *Freedom City: The Substance of Things Hoped For* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1969), 25-34.

to occupy the base signaled the protestors' recognition of role of the federal government in shaping the contours of economic development in the South.⁴ "We are at Greenville," the protestors proclaimed, "Because it is federal property and there are hundreds of empty houses and buildings. We need those houses and the land. We could be trained for jobs in the buildings."⁵ Although inchoate, the Poor People's Conference had thus elevated the role of the modern liberal state, and its developmental priorities in the post-World War II era, to an ascendant position in civil rights discourse.⁶

The Federal Government's response, however, was initially unsympathetic. The next day, 150 military police forcibly removed the protestors and returned the base to its earlier tranquility and abandonment. In centering the concerns of working people in Mississippi and elsewhere, such protests dramatized both the political and spatial limitations of Great Society programs and, perhaps more prophetically, the structural limitations of strategies designed to alleviate the miseries of America's most dispossessed. Though the Greenville protest would augur in subsequent efforts to highlight the plight of African American farmworkers in the Delta, the protests were destined, much like the leaders and foot-soldiers of the 1968 Poor People's campaign, to

⁴ On the contours of postwar southern economic growth, see Robert J. Newman, *Growth in the American South* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1984); James C. Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 99-164; John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York, NY: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974).

⁵ Howell, *Freedom City*, 31.

⁶ As a significant body of historical literature has attested, civil rights protests were frequently more immediately successful in environments where local business elites placed a premium on stability over economic disruption. In areas of the South—like the Delta—that had enjoyed less federally sponsored economic growth, the potential for explosive racial conflicts were significantly higher. See, for instance, Elizabeth Jacoway and David R. Colburn, eds., *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1982); James Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1982), esp. 122-150.

become little more than a footnote in narratives of the Civil Rights Movement’s twilight years.⁷



Figure 5.1. Black Mississippians being removed from the Greenville Air Force Base, 1966.⁸

Yet what may have seemed like an end was also, in many respects, a beginning. Over the course of the 1970s, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta became a testing ground for a new tendency in black developmentalist politics, as a wide range of institutions and leaders framed the region as a new and critical frontier of African American manufacturing, industrial development and business-centered empowerment. Only through a black-led “modernizing” of Mississippi, such proponents argued, could the South’s political economy—and its still fraught race relations—be fundamentally transformed. Indeed, nowhere in the South did the terms and limits of liberal economic

⁷ On the Poor People’s March, see Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 329-358.

⁸ http://cowbird.com/story/117039/Occupy_Greenville_An_Eviction_In_Mississippi/, accessed online 28 February 2016.

policy stand in such stark relief as in the Delta, and nowhere did the question of black participation in the economic future of the South seem such a vexed issue. In the emptied fields, small towns and impoverished backwoods of the Delta was the terrain to define, potentially, the future terms of black citizenship in the post-civil rights South.

It was no coincidence that the Greenville protestors' early vision of a more egalitarian economic future for the Mississippi Delta echoed—albeit in a quite different cadence—an increasingly dominant paradigm in southern politics. Beginning in the late 1950s, a wave of white southern leaders had celebrated the transformative potential of economic development while, to varying degrees, dispensing with racial demagoguery. On the surface, the transformation of southern political culture wrought by the elixir of economic growth and investment was profound. As Bruce Schulman notes, “With few exceptions, development-oriented politicians ruled both parties in the South after 1960.”⁹ Such a rhetorical shift in southern politics was even embraced by the Governor of Mississippi, Paul B. Johnson. Though a son of the Bourbon South, Johnson's election in 1964 suggested, to some observers, a turning point in the history of the Magnolia State. Johnson used his inaugural address to inform the Mississippi legislature that “ours is a state in transition ... a region changing, rapidly now, from an economic dominated by agriculture to one characterized by balance among agriculture, industry and commerce.”¹⁰ To his assembled audience, Johnson cast the future of Mississippi—its “share of tomorrow”—as in large part hinging on the extent to which the state was willing to embrace a program of economic modernization. To achieve such an end, Johnson called

⁹ Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 217.

¹⁰ Paul B. Johnson, “Inaugural Address,” in Bradley G. Bond, ed., *Mississippi: A Documentary History* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 277-283.

for the creation of a Mississippi Research and Development Center that, he exclaimed, would be “unlike anything in existence at this time in America.”¹¹ Conjuring for his audience an imminent horizon of prosperity, outside investment and new, high-wage jobs, Johnson claimed the Center’s technical expertise would—effectively allied to the state’s institutions of higher education and wedded to the power of the Mississippi Agricultural and Industrial Board—place “special emphasis on industry in small towns.”¹² By 1967, the Center would have a proposed home: the Greenville Air Force Base, in the heart of the black-dominated Delta.

Yet only a few years later, plans for the Center and the promise of state-directed economic revitalization in small town Mississippi had been rerouted to the suburbs of Jackson, the state capital. In the interim, however, the Greenville Base had become the site of a new, black-owned and operated development effort: a Community Development Corporation (CDC) named the Delta Foundation.¹³ No prisoner of past failures or difficulties, Charles Bannerman—the head of Delta—viewed his organization as being on the vanguard of a new era in the history of Mississippi, and the South. Building on the institutional legacy of various civil rights initiatives in the Delta, Bannerman and his colleagues worked doggedly to put on solid footing a range of new businesses, including apparel manufacturing, a metal-stamping facility, and an electrical equipment firm. Moreover, the organization developed a range of entrepreneurial offshoots, including a holding company, a sales organization and an investment firm designed to accelerate the pace of economic growth and industrial development in rural Mississippi. As Bannerman

¹¹ Johnson, “Inaugural Address,” 280.

¹² Johnson, “Inaugural Address,” 280.

¹³ Schulman, *Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 218.

told *Black Enterprise* in 1978, “A lot of people return to the South to die—I’m trying to convince people that it’s possible to return here and live.”¹⁴

A geographically-bounded case study, this chapter explores the contours of minority economic development work occurring in the Mississippi Delta during the 1970s. Such efforts represented, as one enthusiastic supporter noted, “a general strategy for black economic and political power in the Delta.”¹⁵ The embrace of rural enterprise and industrialization as a key to altering southern race relations, however, signaled a narrowing of the economic imaginary that had guided black developmentalist politics since the New Deal era. Indeed, the work of the Delta Foundation marked emergence of a new paradigm in black developmentalism, an ideological reformulation best described as a shift in emphasis from “protest to profits.” Increasingly, the Delta Foundation and other rural development advocates embraced an entrepreneurial ethos, while advancing a more moderate reading of American capitalism and the racial limits of American liberalism. For a time, this work coincided with efforts to expose the bureaucratic, often-hidden dimensions of racial inequality that gave powerful evidence for the ongoing presence of the black freedom struggle in the Mississippi Delta. Nonetheless, this entrepreneurial ethos frequently disavowed that black owned-business represented any kind of racial politics at all. For Charles Evers, the brother of slain civil rights activist Medgar Evers, only the economic rejuvenation of Fayette, Mississippi could lead to fundamental change in southern race relations. As he put it, “That’s what money can do. It can change a racist

¹⁴ Bannerman, quoted in “Delta Enterprises: The Rural Route to Corporate Profits,” *Black Enterprise* (June, 1978), 117.

¹⁵ Al Bronstein, et al to Charles Bannerman and Harry Bowie, “A Revised Proposal for a Delta Foundation Advisory Group,” 1 June 1970, Reel R-1306, Grant Files, Ford Foundation Records (hereafter FF).

place into a non-racist place.”¹⁶ Echoing the words and policies of New South boosters, Delta community development efforts rhetorically placed business before blackness, even as the realities of life in the Delta conveyed, on a daily basis, that race, history and the plantation continued to limit black developmental aspirations.

DEFINING THE DELTA

As a geographic formation, the “Delta”—an appellation burdened with much historical and cultural weight—should be more accurately described as the “Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.” On its western edge, the region is bounded by the snake-like flow of the Mississippi River, which moves from Memphis in the North to Vicksburg in the South. In Vicksburg, the Mississippi is met by one of its many tributaries, the Yazoo, whose own path from the northeast—where it bisects a range of small hills around two hundred feet in height—forms the eastern limits of the Delta. Together, those boundaries form a diamond shape (or, for the poet William Alexander Percy, a “badly drawn half oval”) approximately two hundred miles long from North to South, and roughly seventy miles at its widest point.¹⁷ In between, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta covers 7,110 square miles of near-flat land.¹⁸ As William Faulkner once remarked of his entry into that unique landscape, “Crossing the final hill, at the foot of which the rich unbroken alluvial flatness began as the sea began, at the base of its cliffs, dissolving away in the unhurried as the sea itself would dissolve away.”¹⁹ For SNCC and Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party organizer Michael Thelwell, the Delta possessed “a flatness like an ocean of land, but

¹⁶ “Evers Brings Hopes and Jobs in Year as Fayette’s Mayor,” *New York Times*, 8 July 1970.

¹⁷ William Alexander Percy, quoted in Charles Reagan Wilson, “The Mississippi Delta,” *Southern Spaces* (April, 2004), <http://southernspaces.org/2004/mississippi-delta>, accessed online 31 January 2016.

¹⁸ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1.

¹⁹ William Faulkner, quoted in Michael Thelwell, *Duties, Pleasures and Conflicts: Essays in Struggle* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 76.

within that flatness, a sense of confinement, a negation of distance and space that the sea does not have.”²⁰



Figure 5.2. The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.²¹

By the late 1960s, the Delta contained thirteen counties—Sunflower, Tunica, Quitman, Tallahatchie, Coahoma, Bolivar, Washington, LeFlore, Holmes, Humphreys, Sharkey, Yazoo and Issaquena—and 395,000 people, 233,500 of whom identified as African American.²²

Comprehending the vexed human history of the region chroniclers have labeled the “deepest South,” the “South’s South” or the “most southern place on earth,” as well

²⁰ Thelwell, *Duties, Pleasures and Conflicts*, 76.

²¹ Map taken from Cobb, *Most Southern Place*, 4.

²² U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Census of the Population: 1960; the Eighteenth Decennial Census of the United States,” Vol. 1, Part 26: Mississippi (Washington, D.C., 1961), 82-87.

as the centrality of the Delta in the economic imaginary of black developmentalist politics, first requires a significant step back in time. Over fifteen thousand years ago, the geographic and ecological contours of what we know as the modern Delta were consecrated, as a final round of glacial melting propelled the waters of the Mississippi over the coastal plain of the Lower Gulf. As it did so, a rich layer of sediment was deposited into the soil. Indeed, the region's centrality to both the history of American agriculture and to American capitalist development can in part be traced to the Delta's status as an alluvial flood plain, where a pattern of recurrent heavy rains (usually occurring between the months of December and May) have guaranteed an ongoing mineral rejuvenation of the flatlands. Consistent Delta flooding produced a soil that, as one observer noted, could be described as "endlessly deep, dark and sweet."²³ It was an environment, as generations of pioneers, farmers and plantation owners discovered, that contained some of the richest, most productive farmland in the nation.²⁴

Non-native visitors to the region in the early nineteenth century, however, discovered an imposing, subtropical landscape that more closely resembled a swamp than any agricultural arcadia. The region's humid climate had nurtured a rich vegetative life, one primarily manifest in the diverse forestry (including sycamore, poplar, pecan, maple and hickory trees) that blanketed the land. Indeed, new arrivals' awareness of the latent productive potential of the region was cautioned by the numerous challenges of clearing the land for agricultural enterprise. Alternately, the Delta was described as a "seething lush hell" and "a chaos of vines and brush." Before widespread settlement, it was an

²³ David L. Cohn, quoted in Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 5.

²⁴ See also, Randel Tom Cox, "A Geologist's Perspective on the Mississippi Delta," in Janelle Collins, ed., *Defining the Delta: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Lower Mississippi River Delta* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 11-24.

environment where bears, wolves and even jaguars roamed the landscape.²⁵ In addition, the Delta was subject to an unpredictable climate, while the lack of obvious farmland presented a significant, if not insurmountable obstacle to settlement. As such, the earliest arrivals in the region were clustered around the banks of the Mississippi. The interior of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta remained, at least for the moment, an unexploited wilderness.²⁶

The inhospitable conditions of the Delta contributed decisively to the emergence of a particular model of capital-intensive economic development in the early years of settlement. Simply put, yeoman farmers did not possess the resources to make farming in the region viable. As James C. Cobb notes, “the Delta was destined from the beginning to be the domain of substantial planters ... who possessed both the financial resources and the slaves required to clear and drain the land and take full advantage of its fertility.”²⁷ Though planters had begun to arrive in the 1810s and the 1820s, it was between 1830 and 1850 that the settlement of region truly took off. In just a few short decades, this planter class—drawing from some of the best capitalized entrepreneurs in the nation—began to cultivate extraordinary wealth through the establishment of large scale slave labor camps.²⁸ But in other regards, the making of Delta capitalism also relied on shifts in the organization of the American slave economy and, critically, the presence of black labor. In the years before the Civil War, the region was firmly at the leading edge of ever-intensifying models of economic innovation and subsequent human exploitation that did

²⁵ Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014), 360.

²⁶ Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 8-28.

²⁷ Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 8.

²⁸ Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 360.

much to propel, as Edward Baptist has recently argued, the United States to its present status as a global economic power.²⁹ Moreover, the organization of antebellum Delta capitalism had produced a particular demographic landscape that would endure long past the demise of slavery. On the eve of the Civil War, key Delta counties—including Bolivar, Coahoma, Issaquena, Sunflower and Tunica and Washington—all contained significant slave populations that hugely outnumbered whites by ratios as large as fourteen to one. By 1860, the white population in six core Delta counties stood at only 20 percent of the black population, a ratio that made western Mississippi more comparable to pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue than antebellum Virginia.³⁰

The revolution of emancipation notwithstanding, in a number of respects it was clear that nowhere in the South did the “Old” most closely resemble the “New” than in the plantation districts of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta.³¹ In 1910, for instance, the federal Census of Agriculture asserted that “the plantation system is probably more firmly fixed in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta than in any other area of the South.”³² Amidst the now largely-cleared flood plains of the Mississippi, African Americans remained bound to the land—and the political and economic domination of the planter class—by new regimes of labor control, including the crop lien system, debt peonage and violence.³³ Despite limited efforts to achieve meaningful land reform during Reconstruction, the reassertion of planter power after 1875 cemented a particular developmental trajectory that, above all

²⁹ Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, esp. chapters 3, 4.

³⁰ Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 360.

³¹ There is, of course, a rich literature on the legacies of planter economic power in the South, a foundational text of which is Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1986).

³² Cobb, *Most Southern Place on Earth*, 98.

³³ David M. Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1996), 31-55.

else, was designed to preserve the plantation as the central institution of the Delta's political economy. As Clyde Woods has observed, urban development in the area would lag behind other areas of the South, while capital would be invested in forms of infrastructure—particularly levees and railroads—that predominately enhanced the economic prerogatives of the planter class.³⁴ Meanwhile, an array of techniques were developed to secure a pliant, immobile rural labor force, including new vagrancy laws, prison labor and work passes that cemented a system of agricultural production predicated on sharecropping.³⁵ Finally, a range of new institutions, such as the Mississippi River Commission (1879), the Mississippi Valley Cotton Planters' Association (1879) and, later, the Delta Council (1935) and the National Cotton Council (1938), were created to manage and administer this “new” economic order.³⁶ Spectacularly successful, in 1910 sharecroppers or renters operated 92 percent of Delta farms, and a near totality—95 percent—of these operators were African American.³⁷

Between 1910 and 1960, the Delta underwent a final transition that was not indicative, as Clyde Woods notes, of a “transition from feudalism into capitalism; rather, it marked the movement from capital-scarce, labor-intensive plantation production to capital-intensive, labor-surplus neo-plantation production.”³⁸ In two stages—what Woods calls the “Southern Enclosure” movement and a subsequent “Green Revolution”—Delta planters (with significant financial assistance from the federal

³⁴ Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London: Verso, 1998), 76-81.

³⁵ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 40-71; on sharecropping, see Gerald David Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 102-141.

³⁶ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 76-81.

³⁷ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 92.

³⁸ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 127.

government) embarked on a program of widespread evictions, crop diversification and heavy investment in new, more efficient technologies of agricultural production.³⁹ The effect on black Delta life was devastating. Overall, the African American farm population in region dropped substantially between 1930 and 1960. As planters removed sharecroppers and share tenants from their lands and housing, the region's pool of wage laborers swelled, further depressing the economic leverage of black farm workers. Faced with ever more precarious future, many farm families chose to abandon agriculture for a new life in the small towns and cities of Mississippi, other areas of the South and, for many, the urban North.⁴⁰

By the early 1960s, the landscape of the plantation-dominated Delta firmly anchored a world defined by black subordination, poverty, malnutrition and economic exploitation. But the region was not, as a growing group of civil rights activists came to argue, a space apart from the nation as whole; nor was it a product of benign neglect on the part of the modern liberal state. Putting the point as trenchantly as any, Stokely Carmichael framed Delta underdevelopment—in the vein of contemporary dependency theorists—as a product of the power held by planters and southern Democrats, many of whom were often one and the same.⁴¹ No regional aberration from the larger story of

³⁹ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 155-182.

⁴⁰ Jacqueline Jones, "The Southern Diaspora: Origins of the Northern Underclass," in Michael B. Katz, ed., *The Underclass Debate: Views from History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 27-54; James N. Gregory, "The Second Great Migration: An Historical Overview," in Joe W. Trotter, Jr., and Kenneth L. Kusmer, eds., *African American Urban History: The Dynamics of Race, Class and Gender since World War II* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 19-38.

⁴¹ It would not be a stretch to view Carmichael as a lay theorist of dependency economics and uneven development. As a field of economic inquiry, dependency theory argued broadly that poverty could be understood as a product of a mutually constituting relationship between the "core" and "peripheries" of capital accumulation. For an outline of the field and its critique of modernization theory, see Vincent Ferraro, "Dependency Theory: An Introduction," in *The Development Economics Reader*, ed. Giorgio Secondi (London: Routledge, 2008), 58-64; Andre Gunder Frank, "The Development of Underdevelopment," in James D. Cockcroft et. al., eds., *Dependence and Underdevelopment* (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books, 1972), 3-17.

American progress, the Delta, as Carmichael wrote, “was nothing *but* America: the crop-dusting planes, the massive tractors, the huge cotton-picking machines, were twentieth-century corporate America in spades.”⁴² For Carmichael, the Delta was the ultimate rebuttal to the egalitarian pretensions of American democratic capitalism:

this was no hidden aberration lying below the radar-screen of America’s social conscience. This arrangement was not only *tolerated*, this exploitation was heavily *subsidized* by the federal government, making every American taxpayer, white and black, complicit in the brutalizing of their kin.⁴³

Mirroring the underlying premise of Carmichael’s critique, in 1966 Greenville protestors observed the ways in which growth oriented policy and capitalist enterprise were often at odds with black economic wellbeing. As one Delta resident put it witheringly, “the thing about property upset them, but the thing about poor people don’t.”⁴⁴

Following the abrupt conclusion on the Greenville occupation, a range of other initiatives attempted to interject black political claims and labor power into the process of Delta modernization. Most notable of all was Freedom City, an agricultural community established on four hundred acres of land located twelve miles to the southeast of Greenville. With the assistance of the Delta Ministry and its developmental subsidiary, the Delta Opportunities Commission (DOC), ninety-four displaced African Americans took up residency. The effort, however, was bedeviled by disorganization, low levels of agricultural productivity and paltry levels of funding.⁴⁵ Uncharitably, the *New York Times*

⁴² Woods, *Development Arrested*, 121-182; Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 239-255.

⁴³ Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael [Kwame Ture]* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2003), 280.

⁴⁴ Howell, *Freedom City*, 34.

⁴⁵ Newman, *Divine Agitators*, 127-148.

labeled Freedom City “a desperate experiment” that was motivated by neither “intellectual curiosity nor idealism.”⁴⁶ Broadly speaking, development work in the Delta during the late 1960s was consistently undermined by the fact that federal funding—particularly from the OEO—had to first work its way through local bureaucracies, where white administrators had proven adept at preventing federal aid, relief and welfare payments from reaching those most in need. In 1967, for instance, Randolph Blackwell (see chapter 4) reminded the Johnson White House of the limits of the developmental state in the Mississippi Delta. In a telegram, Blackwell noted that:

Events in the state of Mississippi continue to be an embarrassment for our nation ... More than a year ago a[n] OEO labor department program was announced ... [in] Clarksdale ... no one person has been trained in line with this promise ... these kinds of delays speak to the real reason why Negro people are flowing into the cities with a feeling of bitterness and unrest.⁴⁷

As those on the ground clearly understood, the crisis facing rural labor was a question both local and national in nature, one that spoke directly to the significant limits of liberal economic policy.

Over the course of the 1960s, civil rights organizations such as SNCC, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Delta Ministry had brought the human consequences of New Deal liberalism’s most egregious developmental failure into greater clarity. And to a limited extent, their voter registration work had by the second half of the decade, begun to alter the political balance of power in the region. Yet as many activists understood, the rising tide of black political power could not immediately devise an alternative to the Delta’s particular version of economic modernity. The plantations

⁴⁶ “Negroes Start Communal Farm To Escape Mississippi Poverty,” *New York Times*, 25 July 1966.

⁴⁷ “Randolph Blackwell to the White House,” 1 March 1967, box 12, General: Labor 2, Lyndon Baines Johnson Papers.

remained, as they had, since the earliest settlement of the region. Urban growth and industrialization—two principal metrics of Sunbelt modernity in particular and economic modernization more generally—remained mostly foreign concepts in a region largely defined by its rurality.

SUNBELT ECONOMICS

For the most part, the state of Mississippi had indulged in historic resistance to the postwar economic trends that had transformed other areas of the South. Indeed, apostles of economic growth, industrialization and Magnolia modernization—whether white or African American—could look back on the decade of the 1960s with a healthy degree of skepticism about the State’s commitment to economic development. While across the South as a whole between 1954 and 1967 there was significant growth in industrial employment, in Mississippi the picture was less clear.⁴⁸ As the *Delta Democrat Times* pointed out in 1970, there was significant disagreement over whether or not the state had succeeded in creating a business climate favorable to manufacturing. Reviewing the data of both the State Employment Security Commission and the State Agricultural and Industrial Board, the *Times* could only conclude that even in an era of supposed prosperity, the numbers did not “provide a great deal of comfort in view of the state’s long building effort to create a more robust industrial economy ... [and] a greater share of the American industrial revolution.”⁴⁹ In the newspaper’s estimation, it was reasonable to

⁴⁸ Cobb, *Selling of the South*, 145; for a more extensive accounting of industrial job growth in this period, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1958* (p.782), *1964* (p.770), *1972* (p.714) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1958, 1964, 1972).

⁴⁹ “Where are the Jobs?” *Delta Democrat Times*, 9 Feb 1970.

conclude that, at best, the state had only created around 60,000 jobs over the course of the decade.⁵⁰

In the rest of the South, however, the “Sunbelt” was alive and well. Regional boosters trumpeted low levels of unionization and cheap labor, while implementing pro-business tax legislation that projected an image of the South as a blank canvas of potential profit to outside investors. Though undoubtedly centered around urban poles of economic growth such as Houston, Atlanta and the North Carolina research triangle, other areas that could be qualified as either “exurban” or “rural” also experienced significant economic activity. In large part, much of the region’s economic transformation could be attributed to federal defense spending. As Bruce Schulman notes, from the 1950s onward, the face of American liberalism that southerners came to know most clearly was not that of New Deal-era welfare agencies; rather, “whether it be planting industry, expanding universities and research facilities, or restructuring the regional labor market, the representative of the national state ... was the military.”⁵¹ For the most part, jobs created by the growth of defense industries in the South benefited educated workers who arrived, increasingly, from outside the South.⁵² And in many respects, the militarized terms of growth-oriented liberalism in the South increasingly subsumed the goals of economic security and human welfare set out by the New Deal. Recognizing this trend, the liberal journal *Southern Exposure* noted that the South’s “dependence on the federal military dole ... is deepening the push ... not for humane domestic programs, but for a continued policy of growth that is both stimulated and

⁵⁰ “Where are the Jobs?” *Delta Democrat Times*, 9 Feb 1970.

⁵¹ Schulman, *Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 135.

⁵² Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 159.

secured through massive military spending.”⁵³ Overall, however, the two decades between 1960 and 1980 were a boon for the southern economy as a whole, which outpaced every other region in the nation in terms of economic growth, while raising its contribution of national manufacturing from 17.2 % in 1958 to 27.4 percent by 1982.⁵⁴

Postwar southern growth did not just indicate a convergence with national economic norms. Undoubtedly, the decline of southern agriculture, in combination with pre-existing regional wage differentials and the presence of an ever-growing pool of surplus labor, created favorable conditions for rapid economic transformation. Yet by the end of the 1960s, as Bruce Schulman notes, the South was “No longer a satellite in the national economic universe.” Rather, “the South of the 1970s set nationwide industrial trends.”⁵⁵ The economic changes transforming the South offered powerful evidence for those who had embraced “modernization theory” as a normative model of economic progress.⁵⁶ Much of the South’s postwar economic growth had been propelled by a number of key areas of production—what economist and modernization theory scion W.W. Rostow called the critical “leading sectors”—that included machinery, electrical equipment, transportation-related manufacturing and metalwork.⁵⁷ Comprising a secondary thrust of southern economic growth was the rise of “footloose” industries that

⁵³ “Southern Militarism,” *Southern Exposure* 1:1 (1973), 60-62; see also, Kari Frederickson, *Cold War Dixie: Militarization and Modernization in the American South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013), esp. chapters 3, 7.

⁵⁴ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 152.

⁵⁵ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 153.

⁵⁶ It is worth noting that a significant body of scholarship—much of it proscriptive—on modernization theory pertains to the US South. The region was, in many senses, the domestic laboratory for economic models usually disseminated overseas.

⁵⁷ W.W. Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1952; repr. 1962), 261-273.

predominately settled in rural or exurban areas of the region where cheaper land and labor offered favorable conditions for profit in so-called “low skill” enterprises.⁵⁸

Yet the Sunbelt, like any edifice, was not without its shadows. Best exemplifying what some observers termed the “two Souths” was the state of Mississippi where, as of 1969, the per capita income of African American residents was a paltry 35 percent of whites.⁵⁹ In this regard, the Delta was emblematic of broader trends in postwar southern development, which had largely bypassed areas of the region with significant African American populations, instead favoring predominately white areas such as coastal Mississippi, northern Alabama and northwest Arkansas. Black workers in the region remained largely tied to non-growth sectors such as agriculture. Finally, the historic underfunding of black education in the South, and ongoing resistance to educational integration, presented a significant structural barrier to African Americans’ aspirations to secure work in the region’s new, high-wage and high-skilled workforce. During the 1960s, black southerners comprised only ten percent of the workforce in the region’s expanding industries. Though some southern leaders—notably, North Carolina Governor (1954-61) and Commerce Secretary (1961-65) Luther Hodges—lamented that black exclusion from Sunbelt prosperity would be a detriment to the economic vitality of the region as whole, rural economic elites in black-dominated areas cling tightly to a model of production best described as “boondock capitalism.” For such unreconstructed entrepreneurs, a longstanding investment in racial subordination and white supremacy

⁵⁸ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 219.

⁵⁹ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 178.

could not be sacrificed on the altar of higher profits, economic diversification or regional development.⁶⁰

THE DELTA FOUNDATION

Faced with a near-herculean task, it was left to one new organization to take responsibility for transforming the grim reality that largely defined African American economic aspirations in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. As *Black Enterprise* noted in a glowing 1978 profile, “even its name would have seemed a contradiction in terms.”⁶¹

Created in 1969, the Delta Foundation—now rebranded as Delta Enterprises—had almost a decade of experience working on industrial development projects and had become, as *Black Enterprise* noted, a “one of the most successful models for rural economic development.”⁶²



Figure 5.3. The staff of Delta Enterprises, circa 1978.⁶³

By the late 1970s, Delta Enterprises-affiliated businesses—which included Fine Vines, Inc., Mid-South Stamping Inc., and Electro Controls, Inc., accounted for almost six

⁶⁰ Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 174-205, 206-221; Bruce B. Williams and Bonnie Thornton Dill, “African-Americans in the Rural South: The Persistence of Poverty and Racism,” in Emery N. Castle, ed., *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 348.

⁶¹ “Delta Enterprises,” *Black Enterprise*, 105.

⁶² “Delta Enterprises,” *Black Enterprise*, 105.

⁶³ “Delta Enterprises,” *Black Enterprise*, 105.

million dollars in annual sales, a figure which put placed the company squarely in the middle of the journal's heralded top-100 list of African American-owned companies. For his work, Charles Bannerman was awarded the journal's 1977 Achievement Award in Manufacturing.⁶⁴

The immediate origins of the Delta Foundation could in part be traced to the abject failure of state-led efforts to generate or encourage meaningful economic diversification in the Delta. Initially, the much-touted Mississippi Research Development Center (MRDC)—funded in 1967 by matching grants from both the Ford Foundation and the state of Mississippi—was envisioned as playing a leading role in the transformation of small-town, rural Mississippi. As one Delta Foundation grant proposal noted, the project had “begun with bright hopes for a new era of progress and cooperation between poor blacks and white plantation owners and merchants.”⁶⁵ Moreover, Governor Johnson—the Center's initial guiding force—had acquiesced to the creation of a bi-racial managing board, whose members were charged with shaping the terms of Mississippi modernization in ways that might benefit *all* of the Magnolia state's citizens. Following the 1967 election of Governor John Bell Williams, however, state financial support for the center had been significantly reduced. From the vantage point of 1971, the Delta Foundation saw little to commend in the work of the MRDC, whose two most significant efforts—a trailer manufacturing company and a wire harness plant—had both entered bankruptcy.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ “The Fourth Black Enterprise Annual Achievement Awards,” *Black Enterprise* (January 1978), 36.

⁶⁵ Delta Foundation, “Rockefeller Brothers Fund Proposal,” July 1971, folder 1853, box 300, Series 3.1., Rockefeller Brothers Fund Papers (hereafter RBF).

⁶⁶ Delta Foundation (hereafter DF), “Rockefeller Brothers Fund Proposal,” July 1971.

Though resources and poor management were certainly to blame for much of the MRDC's ineffectiveness, many observers could see quite clearly that the Center's leadership had done little to repudiate longstanding development norms in Mississippi. As the Delta Foundation argued, the MRDC's "orientation and political position all but ensure that the primary beneficiaries of whatever projects it may undertake in the future will continue to benefit the prosperous white plantation owners and businessmen, not the poor."⁶⁷ "It is unlikely," the Foundation concluded, that the MRDC "would risk its valuable governmental and interest group allies to ensure that the state's black people receive a more equitable share of the product of Mississippi economic growth, as owners and managers of business."⁶⁸

The intrigue surrounding the Delta Foods Corporation also provided clear evidence for the power of the state's elite to proffer undemocratic development policies. Like the Greenville base, the Delta Foods plant was one of the region's most significant pieces of infrastructure, and its location in rural Sunflower County could be attributed in large part to the political muscle of Mississippi Senator James D. Eastland, whose family cotton plantation of over 6,000 acres was located nearby.⁶⁹ Instead of acting as a harbinger of economic growth to a depressed region or providing an alternative to declining agricultural labor for the region's workers, Delta Foods was an example of planned bankruptcy designed to enrich the few. Though the Delta Foundation had initially explored acquiring the floundering business, the process of conducting a

⁶⁷ DF, "Economic Development Proposal for Planning Monies For Delta Foundation," 25 September 1969, 70-275, Reel R-1306, Ford Foundation Records (hereafter FF).

⁶⁸ DF, "Economic Development Proposal."

⁶⁹ On the Eastland family's longstanding role in Delta life and politics, see Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 6-166.

feasibility study left Bannerman and others convinced that the company's poor performance was designed to force a default on a 3.5 million dollar Economic Development Administration loan, leaving the plant—itsself valued at 6.5 million dollars—to be purchased at a fraction of the cost. As the Delta Foundation put it, “the Delta Foods situation highlights the hypocrisy of government and financial institutions who insist on the most exact planning and the inclusion of high powered management personnel in most minority business projects.”⁷⁰

Meanwhile, black-led grassroots efforts also struggled to respond to the decimation of the Delta's rural labor force. In fact, the Delta Foundation had initially been constructed from human and institutional resources of a number of development-orientated organizations working in the area, including Mississippi Action for Community Education (MACE), the Delta Opportunity Commission, Mount Bayou Development Corporation, Holmes County Capital Accumulation and the Delta Ministry.⁷¹ Before the 1970s, those organizations had initiated a number of modest ventures that had met with little economic success, including a number of projects that were either stillborn or had been kept alive only by virtue of significant outside resources. “None of these local programs,” the Delta Foundation would later note, “have sufficient staff or money to carry out the sorts of programs which will produce significant gains for their people and it is unlikely that this condition will improve under present circumstances.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Delta Foundation, “Rockefeller Brothers Fund Proposal.”

⁷¹ Thomas Wahman, “Delta Foundation (Greenville, Mississippi), 28 October 1970, folder 1852, box 300, RG 3.1, RBF.

⁷² DF, “Economic Development Proposal.”

The problems afflicting Mississippi development work, however, were inseparable from the waning energies, and shifting priorities, of the Civil Rights Movement. According to leaders of the Delta Ministry, perhaps the most significant organization operating in the region, the cause of black economic empowerment was being undermined by an incoherent, operationally stratified approach. The Ministry's critique had two primary dimensions, calling attention to the increasing specialization of anti-poverty work—what the organization called a “localization of interests”—and the deleterious consequences of the growth of an endogamous black leadership class whose parochialism, they argued, undermined the cause of broad based racial empowerment.⁷³ As the Delta Ministry wrote in a grant proposal, civil rights organizers work was increasingly limited by the conflation of political efficacy with “substantive gains for their political community.”⁷⁴ In its broad outline, Delta's assessment of the trails of black development work in the late 1960s aligns with the historian Charles Payne's assessment of the Mississippi Freedom struggle's twilight. As Payne has noted, “one of the central ironies of the period ... [was] that while elaborating an ideology that gave a new primacy to racial unity, Black activists increasingly lost the capacity to work effectively with one another.”⁷⁵ The Delta Foundation was no less circumspect in their assessment of Delta activism, noting in 1969 that “human, physical, and financial resources” had become “objects of woeful competition.”⁷⁶

⁷³ Delta Ministry, “Proposal Draft,” 10 July 1970, folder 1852, box 300, RG 3.1, RBF.

⁷⁴ Delta Ministry, “Proposal Draft.”

⁷⁵ Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 385.

⁷⁶ DF, “Economic Development Proposal.”

Chartered as a non-profit community development corporation (CDC) in June of 1969, the Delta Foundation was envisioned by its proponents as an institution capable of filling what they viewed as a “black economic development vacuum” in the Delta.⁷⁷ Initially, the Foundation was funded by a small endowment of \$20,000 that had been collectively raised by fourteen local community organizations, each of whom would have a representative on Delta’s board. Subsequently, the Foundation secured more substantial grants from the Presbyterian Church and the Interreligious Foundation from Community Organizations (IFCO), before securing its major source of funding: a \$1.2 million grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). Ironically, this was a grant that had initially been earmarked for New Communities in southwest Georgia, before local resistance pushed OEO officials toward the Delta Foundation as a more palatable, and supposedly apolitical alternative.

Central to the work of the Foundation, however, was a non-native southerner: Charles Bannerman. Born in 1940, Bannerman was raised in Harlem and Columbus, Ohio. A blend, in the estimation of *Black Enterprise*, “of northern cool and southern congeniality,” Bannerman was educated at Ohio State University where he majored in History and Political Science, while taking a number of classes offered by the American Manufacturing Association.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ “MACE Proposal for Continued Funding,” n.d., folder 1855, box 301, RG 3.1, RBF.

⁷⁸ “Charles Bannerman Resume,” Folder 1859, Box 301, Series 3.1., RBFP, RAC; “Delta Enterprises,” *Black Enterprise*, 105.



Figure 5.3., Charles Bannerman, circa 1978.⁷⁹

Graduating in 1965, Bannerman travelled South to volunteer for SNCC in Mississippi where, presaging his later work, he balanced voter registration work with teaching classes on bookkeeping.⁸⁰ For a time thereafter Bannerman held a number of jobs, including serving as a research assistant for a CBS television documentary, *Hunger in America*, and, perhaps more significantly, working as Director of Technical Assistance for the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty. From 1968 onwards, however, Bannerman would live and work in Mississippi, acting as the Associate Director for Mississippi Action for Community Education (MACE) and, from 1969 as the chairman and founder of the Delta Foundation.⁸¹

Beginning early in 1970, the Delta Foundation began to explore the possibility of bringing black industrial development to rural Mississippi. As they put it, Delta would strive to build robust, profitable enterprises in black dominated towns which traditionally

⁷⁹ Photo taken from “Fourth Black Enterprise Annual Achievement Awards,” *Black Enterprise*, 36.

⁸⁰ “Delta Enterprises,” *Black Enterprise*, 115.

⁸¹ “Charles Bannerman Resume,” n.d., folder 1859, box 301, series 3.1., RBF.

“industry has avoided like the plague.”⁸² Yet that assessment described only a fraction of the immense challenge facing the organization. As Delta quickly identified, a number of structural impediments that threatened to undermine the cause of black manufacturing.

As the organization noted, these included:

- 1) The inability of local community organizations to accumulate sizeable amounts of investment capital;
- 2) The absence of indigenous financial institutions sympathetic to Mississippi’s black community and committed to furthering its economic development; and
- 3) The lack of skilled professionals with economic and business development and management capabilities.⁸³

Expertise, at the very least, could be acquired relatively easily. By emphasizing the entrepreneurial, apolitical dimensions of black manufacturing efforts, it became possible to harness a variety of resources and forms of technical assistance from outside the South. Early in its existence, the Delta leaned heavily on technical support from the Cummins Engine Company, Kroger and the National Council for Equal Business Opportunity, among others.⁸⁴

In the organization’s nascent weeks and months, no question loomed larger than identifying the type of black-owned and operated enterprises that could potentially reach economic viability in an impoverished region where resources were meager, white resistance remained, and black education and political power remained on uneasy ground. Over the course of six months, Delta launched a planning program that, in its broad outlines, showed that the Foundation wished to bring a semblance of the Sunbelt to rural Mississippi. As the organization explained in an early proposal,

⁸² “Delta Enterprises,” *Black Enterprise*, 106.

⁸³ Rockefeller Brothers Fund Executive Committee, “Delta Foundation, Inc.,” 11 August 1971, folder 1853, box 300, series 3.1, RBF.

⁸⁴ DF, “Proposal,” n.d., 70-275, Reel R-1306, Grant Files, FF.

The key to the growth and prosperity of some areas of the South has been the rapid process of industrialization ... New industries such as textile mills and aerospace firms have located in parts of Alabama and Georgia. Although a few plants have been brought to Mississippi, the activity has been halting. The Foundation will attempt to determine what resources exist in the area which can be made attractive to industry and what sort of industries can be attracted to the area.⁸⁵

And like the growth of the Sunbelt elsewhere in the South, Delta identified the critical role of outside investment to “being the western portion of the state to life.”⁸⁶ Following programs of industrial recruitment that have proved profitable elsewhere in the South, the Mississippi Conference of Black Mayors would later offer a ten-year tax exemption for industry that was willing to operate in the small-town Delta.⁸⁷ In the meantime, however, the range of potential options were constrained by low levels of education in the region. This state of affairs had to be improved, the Foundation argued, “before any except the lowest-paying industries will be inclined to consider building in the Delta.”⁸⁸ Therefore, Delta executives realized that the alternative—building “indigenous industries which the Delta’s present human and natural resources are best suited”—was, for the time being, the organization’s best option.⁸⁹

The first Delta Foundation project was Fine Vines, Inc., an apparel plant established in the fall of 1970 on the old Greenville Air Force base.

⁸⁵ “Economic Development Proposal,” 25 September 1969, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ “Delta Enterprises,” *Black Enterprise*, 117.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ “Economic Development Proposal,” 25 September 1969, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.



Figure 5.4. Fine Vines promotional material, circa 1973.⁹⁰

Specializing in the production of blue jeans, Fine Vines required an initial start-up investment of \$250,000, part of which came from the Delta Foundation's own equity fund and part, significantly, from a loan secured from the First National Bank of Greenville. The latter was, in many respects, a landmark moment in the history of rural black development efforts; though backed with a ninety percent guarantee by the Small Business Administration (SBA), the loan was the largest ever extended by a Mississippi financial institution to an African American organization.⁹¹ Employing approximately sixty people, the majority of whom were women and formerly unemployed, Fine Vines

⁹⁰ "Fine Vines Advertisement," n.d., folder 1855, box 301, RG 3.1, RBF.

⁹¹ First National Bank of Greenville, Mississippi to Charles D. Bannerman, 9 March 1972, Reel R-1306, FF.

immediately became the largest black owned business in the Mississippi Delta. Limited access to capital and a range of early problems with Fine Vines cautioned the Delta Foundation against conjuring new black businesses from scratch. Fine Vines not only required significant investment capital, but trained management, continuing sources of credit and reliable markets for the company's products, none of which would be easy to acquire for an enterprise "with no performance records or history of profitability," never mind one carrying "the stigma of a new minority-owned business."⁹² Instead, the Delta Foundation began to concentrate its efforts on acquiring pre-existing firms, company sub-divisions or product lines. And through experience, they developed a range of criteria that emphasized the long term durability of the product, the lack of foreign competition, and low levels of investment in employee training. Finally, potential Delta Foundation businesses would have to be relocated to Mississippi without effecting the companies' existing customer base or profitability.⁹³

Fulfilling that lengthy criteria was Mid-South Metal Stamping, Inc. Acquired in October of 1971, Mid-South was moved from its previous location in Memphis, Tennessee to Sardis, a small town located in Panola County. Up to that point, the company had produced a number of products, including automobile, furniture and electrical components. The choice of Mid-South reflected careful planning and research on the part of the Delta Foundation. As the organization noted in a press release announcing the acquisition, Mid-South products would assist Delta in taking advantage of the region's historic lack of industry, where "the demand for metal stampings for

⁹² "Economic Development Proposal," 25 September 1969, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

Southern industrial uses is double what can be presently produced in the region.”⁹⁴

Charles Bannerman noted, “Industrial purchasing agents ... would prefer to purchase from nearby suppliers who can give better delivery and lower freight costs, but the lack of local stamping capacity has forced them to go to Detroit or Chicago to fill their needs.”⁹⁵ Indeed, the purchase of Mid-South demonstrated, more than any other Delta enterprise, the extent and depth of the Foundation’s attempts to align black development work with the growth sectors in the southern economy. In short order, Mid-South would Delta’s most profitable business.

Early returns on these efforts were certainly encouraging. “All in all,” Mitchell Sviridoff, the Ford Foundation’s Vice President for National Affairs wrote in 1971, “we believe that this first year has been a good one.”⁹⁶ Indeed, appeasing Ford executives was part and parcel of a larger effort on the part of Delta to use a specific stream of Ford money—what the Foundation called “P.R.I.” or “Program Related Investment Funds” to advance the cause of black economic empowerment. As Charles Bannerman noted in a letter to Bryant George, he hoped that in addition to that year’s grant of \$130,000, Ford would be willing to provide \$800,000 in PRI funds, to be deposited “in a Special Account in a Mississippi Bank in the name of the Delta Foundation with all interest going back to the Ford Foundation and with conditions governing the use of the funds.” For Bannerman, “The advantages of creating this kind of venture capital ... are abundant.”⁹⁷

In large part, the seemingly ambitious request suggested the extent to which the Delta Foundation had recognized that black manufacturing work—in an era of declining

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ “Press Release,” 22 October 1971, folder 1853, box 300, series 3.1., RBF.

⁹⁶ Mitchell Sviridoff to Roger P. Hoffman, 30 June 1971, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

⁹⁷ Charles Bannerman to Bryant George, 9 April 1971, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

federal funding for anti-poverty initiatives—depended on the active participation of local financial institutions. As Bannerman framed his argument to Ford, PRI funds would allow the Delta Foundation to “Gain increased credibility in the business and banking community.” “If creditors, bankers, and companies which the Delta Foundation is seeking assistance [from] would be able to see that we have sufficient capital to back proposed ventures,” Bannerman argued, “It would also enhance our position in being able to secure bank participation in S.B.A. guaranteed loans we will be seeking during the year.”⁹⁸ In addition, PRI funds were especially important given that OEO grants explicitly prohibited their use for garment manufacturing, a legislative quirk that had been inserted by northeastern congressman concerned that federally-sponsored anti-poverty work might undermine industry in their own districts.

Efforts to enhance the equity fund of the Delta Foundation, however, brought the organization into an entanglement with the Internal Revenue Service’s definition of “non-profit work.” By avowing the potential of black business and industrial development as the means to reduce poverty in the region, and requiring profits to be reinvested in new manufacturing efforts, the Delta Foundation had raised the question about the propriety of its tax-free, 501c status. As lawyers representing Delta noted, they had much to do to convince the IRS that “the concept Delta has of economic development is indeed charitable rather than entrepreneurial.”⁹⁹ To circumvent this problem, the Delta Foundation created a for-profit subsidiary corporation, named Delta Enterprises, to serve as a “venture capital and holding company ... to help finance development projects.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Charles Bannerman to Bryant George, 9 April 1971, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

⁹⁹ Timothy L. Jenkins to Bryant George, 12 March 1970, Reel R-1306, FF.

¹⁰⁰ DF, “Ford Foundation Report,” 25 June 1974, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

In addition, the Foundation established a venture capital firm, to be known as the Delta Development and Management Corporation (DDMC). Indeed, the establishment of Delta Enterprises and the DDMC dramatized how far black economic activism had come in the relatively few years since the Greenville occupation. No longer reliant on protest as a sole lever of change, the Delta Foundation had developed a sophisticated institutional apparatus that could forge linkages between both the federal government, private philanthropy as well as local, regional and national business resources.

All told, by 1973 the Delta Foundation could attest to an impressive track record. In a few short years, the organization had become the largest minority-owned manufacturing corporation in the state of Mississippi, and one of—if not *the*—largest enterprise of its kind in the South as a whole. And the organization was ready for further expansion. In 1974, the purchase of Electro Controls, Inc.—an electronics company specializing in electro-magnetic switches and sensors—was secured. Though the plant was to remain in Tulsa, Oklahoma before being moved to Canton, Mississippi, the acquisition brought Delta Enterprises' total annual sales to over five million dollars by 1975. In a short period of time, the contours of a black-owned and administered growth area had begun to emerge. As the organization noted, “The three industrial segments—metal, apparel, and electronics, located in the north, middle and South of the Delta, will be our base for further expansion.”¹⁰¹ By 1976, Delta hoped to reach ten million dollars in total sales, to have achieved “complete viability,” and to be no longer dependent of federal or private largesse for financial support.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² DF, “Delta Enterprises Progress Report,” September 1974, folder 1855, box 301, RG 3.1, RBF.

It is difficult to overstate either the appeal of the Delta Foundation or the high regard in which Charles Bannerman was held in liberal anti-poverty circles during the 1970s. Almost immediately, the work of the Delta Foundation captured the attention of the economic development establishment. Late in 1969, a meeting was convened at Harvard University's Kennedy Institute, where representatives of the Delta Foundation (including Owen Brooks and Harry Bowie) met for over three hours with an assortment of scholars and economic policy experts. That this seemingly improbable confluence had occurred was because of the initiative of Lester Salamon. A future authority on black land issues (see Chapter 2), Salamon was at the time enrolled in Harvard doctoral program in American Government, where he was completing a dissertation that, not coincidentally, examined the applicability of "overseas" development techniques to the state of Mississippi.¹⁰³ From there, Salamon had brought the work of the Delta Foundation to the attention of Al Bronstein, a civil rights lawyer who was serving as Associate Director of Kennedy's Institute of Politics. No less interested were members of Harvard's Development Advisory Service (DAS) and a number of Harvard's economic faculty, including Francis Bator, Lester Gordon, Carl Gotsch and Walter Falcon.¹⁰⁴

For the most part, the northeastern liberals enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to apply the research, expertise and influence that had done much to define the terms of postwar "modernization" to the seemingly resilient problems of domestic "underdevelopment." Confirming as much, the Ford Foundation executive Bryant George

¹⁰³ Donald M. Stewart to Bryant George, 24 November 1969, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF; this dissertation would eventually be completed as Lester Salamon, "Protest, Politics and Modernization in the American South: Mississippi as a 'Developing Society,'" Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1972.

¹⁰⁴ Donald M. Stewart to Bryant George, 24 November 1969, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF; the DAS was part of Harvard's Center for International Affairs, a think tank and policy institute founded in 1958 by Henry Kissinger.

noted in a letter to Ford Executive Roger Wilkins that the DAS's interest, in particular, was in "exploring whether or not Harvard can apply its skills and experience in providing technical assistance in underdeveloped countries to a community development project in this country."¹⁰⁵ Mississippi had been selected, George noted, "because it has many of the characteristics of an underdeveloped country," while the Delta Foundation—which had been working to bring coherence to black community development work in the region, had "many of the characteristics of a quasi-governmental planning agency in an underdeveloped country."¹⁰⁶ Another Kennedy School graduate student, Donald M. Stewart (an African American who would later work in the Ford Foundation's Overseas Development Division) saw even broader applicability in work of Delta. "From this effort," Stewart noted, "hopefully there would emerge models and economic development designs which could be applied to general problems of rural poverty, particularly with regards to black people."¹⁰⁷

Efforts to establish a working relationship between Cambridge and Greenville dramatized the inconsistencies, if not ideological divergences, between local empowerment efforts and top-down models of development. As one Harvard memorandum acknowledged, "the group at the University traditionally concerned with economic development problems has only limited expertise that is relevant to the type of plant feasibility studies in which the Delta Foundation is now engaged."¹⁰⁸ In particular, the Harvard Advisory team seemed intent on pushing a series of questions—about long

¹⁰⁵ Bryant George to Roger Wilkins, "A Harvard Advisory Group Project in Mississippi," 5 June 1970, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

¹⁰⁶ George to Wilkins, "Harvard Advisory Group Project."

¹⁰⁷ Donald M. Stewart to Bryant George, 24 November 1969, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

¹⁰⁸ "Memorandum" 29 November 1970, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

term black political power in the region, local resistance, income inequality, the nature and meaning of “black control,” and the role of other black institutions—that, for the most part, were not central to the Delta’s entrepreneurial idiom of economic development.¹⁰⁹ As it was, the proposed program of technical assistance amounted to little; as Carl Gotsch wrote to the Ford Foundation, he was “keenly disappointed” that the planning had been laid aside, but noted that DAS members “have indicated they would be prepared to contribute their own time toward a program for improving the welfare of black people in the Delta.”¹¹⁰

The interest—if frustrated—on the part of Harvard development experts reflected the ways in which the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta has become the object of overlapping economic imaginaries by the beginning of the 1970s. For the vital center, particularly the supportive philanthropic foundations, the work of the Delta Foundation confirmed their dearly-held gospel of economic modernization.¹¹¹ Given the resolution of civil and political rights, the human problems of the Delta were thus ripe to be apprehended in non-racial terms, and explained in large part as a result of the region’s distance from modern, industrial society. Such a framework was distinctly reminiscent of the intellectual logic Howard Brick has identified as a “wishful theory” of human relations.¹¹²

Yet liberals’ commitment to black economic development also harmonized with contemporaneous streams of Black Power thought. But where Salamon, Gotsch and

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Carl H. Gotsch to Bryant George, 3 June 1971, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

¹¹¹ Karen Ferguson, *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 23-84.

¹¹² Howard Brick, *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 151.

others saw a potential convergence between Mississippi and “post-capitalist” America, some Black Power advocates saw the Delta as a refuge from an American economy dominated by racial capitalism. For the Republic of New Afrika’s Imari Obadele, the Delta (and some of the surrounding counties to the south) was to be re-defined as “Kush District.” Named for the ancient African empire, the Delta became ground zero for a future black nation, an “open frontier” that promised:

not only a massive re-direction of black urban growth but the end of our unorganized drifting out of the South into the maelstrom of the western and northern cities, and it suggests the beginning of an organized and purposeful movement back to planned communities in the Deep South, our natural homeland away from home, for those who want it. It suggests an escape from the almost certain ravages of America’s fast-approaching “economic readjustment” for millions of our folk.¹¹³

At one level, Obadele’s definition of the Delta highlighted a growing pessimism about black urban life and, more broadly, indicated the extent to which the RNA understood African Americans’ relationship to American economic modernity as inherently defined by structural exploitation. In such a framework the only solution, as the RNA proposed, was territorial separatism.

Contrasting the developmental visions of the Republic of New Afrika with that of the Delta Foundation, however, dramatizes a fundamental difference in the two organizations’ assessment of American capitalist development. Unlike the RNA, the Delta Foundation’s embrace of black business evinced a reluctance to envision a future defined by the perpetual and unremitting evisceration of black economic livelihoods. For the most part, Bannerman and the Delta Foundation hewed far closer to the optimism

¹¹³ Imari Abubakari Obadele, “On the Matter of Black Survival,” *Ebony* (May 1974), 84-85.

inherent in the framework of modernization theory, a model of development that held that given the establishment of the correct conditions, economic growth would naturally ensue. As they noted:

Due to the nature of the American system and its heavy reliance on the market mechanism for the distribution of economic and social goods and services, the economic and social aspects of community development are highly interrelated. It is difficult if not impossible to organize for and achieve social equality without addressing the issue of economic dependency. Eliminating the effects of four hundred years of oppression requires economic development and venture packaging programs directed toward the goal of growing economic self-sufficiency.¹¹⁴

For the most part, the organization held a far more pragmatic assessment of the centrality of capitalism to American life in general.

In another regard, however, the intellectual apparatus of modernization theory reveals why the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta—conceptualized as a pre-industrial economic space—appeared to hold so much possibility to the Delta Foundation. In part, it was the region’s temporal location *behind* broader regional and national economic trends that shaped conceptions of the Delta as veritable frontier of possibility, one not yet constrained by “mature” regimes of industrial subordination. As the Delta Foundation put it:

Unlike the cities of the North, Mississippi does not only require programs which will place greater economic power in the hands of its black poor, nor programs to revitalize certain depressed areas. What is most needed is for the process of overall development to *begin*. [emphasis added mine].¹¹⁵

In large part, it was the historical moment itself that lent urgency to the work of the Delta Foundation. As Mississippi’s agricultural economy threatened to finally replace

¹¹⁴ DF, “Ford Foundation Report,” 25 June 1974, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

“traditional” modes of production with “modern” forms of economic development, Delta activists contended that timely and strategic interventions could establish a more egalitarian model of Delta capitalism. Unlike the urban North, where African Americans’ relationship to industrial production seemed to have been already been defined in exploitative terms, the prospect of black-owned enterprise in the rural South seemed, however quixotically, to offer the means corral Sunbelt energies to the benefit of rural African Americans.

When viewed in totality, the work of the Delta Foundation suggested an effort to achieve a variant of what the activist, intellectual and former Freedom School educator Staughton Lynd would later term “reindustrialization from below.”¹¹⁶ Like Lynd’s proscriptions for Pennsylvania steel country, the Delta Foundation’s work suggested their hope the black business could contribute to, if not lead to a model of grassroots economic revitalization that kept the democratic promise of American capitalism at its center. “Most simply and generally stated,” the Delta Foundation noted, “the objective of this institution is to develop permanent income producing businesses expressly for and managed by low-income persons.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, the Delta Foundation remained tied to the communitarian strains of developmental thought in the ways it linked enterprise to both economic growth and social transformation. As Bannerman told *Black Enterprise*, “When you have a payroll exceeding one million dollars in a town the size of Greenville ... you

¹¹⁶ In a 1983 essay, Lynd argued for the necessity of a democratically-oriented, administratively decentralized “short-run public-works programs ... [for] the production of goods and services of the long term.” Staughton Lynd, “The View from Steel Country,” *Democracy* (May 1983), 21-33; for more on Lynd’s work with the Freedom Schools, see Staughton Lynd, “The Freedom Schools: Concept and Organization,” *Freedomways* 5:2 (1965), 302-310.

¹¹⁷ DF, “Ford Foundation Report,” 25 June 1974, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

definitely have an impact. Our employees vote, deposit money in local banks, and buy from local businesses.”¹¹⁸



Figure 5.5. Black economic modernity in the rural South. *Black Enterprise*, 1978.¹¹⁹

Initially, the avowal of black business’ transformative potential did necessarily go hand in hand with an unwillingness to highlight Mississippi power brokers’ investment in the status quo of regional underdevelopment. Reflecting on the history of Mississippi, a Delta Foundation grant proposal argued that “the history of development efforts in its fertile Delta is a story of travail—of white ill will and intransigence and black inexperience and resourcelessness.”¹²⁰ In a number of ways, Bannerman and Delta could clearly see the ways in the history of the Delta compelled attention to deeply entrenched

¹¹⁸ “Delta Enterprises,” *Black Enterprise*, 115.

¹¹⁹ Image take from “Delta Enterprises,” *Black Enterprise*, 110.

¹²⁰ DF, “Ford Foundation Proposal,” July 1971, p.1, 70-275, Reel R-1306, FF.

forms of economic and political power which remained a foundational road-block on the road to modernity. As the organization argued:

The backwardness of the state is not just only the result of ignorance or stupidity. Calculated self-preservation has obviously played a distinct part in Mississippi's retardation; or the state's powerful landowners realize that the transformation of the area's economy would signal an end to their hegemony."¹²¹

Thus the Foundation viewed the work of creating meaningful forms of economic diversification as an inherent challenge to the organization of a Delta political economy built on racial subordination. As they argued, true economic development in the region would:

bring jobs and income—and therefore greater influence for the state's huge black population—an intolerable prospect for an elite which has built an empire on the bodies of slaves and serfs. It would mean immigration of technicians, scientists, and managers and increase the political and economic leverage of bankers, planners, developers, and merchants. It would in other words unleash the forces of change which accompany growth and which inevitably tumble the landed from power.¹²²

The Delta Foundation's point was explicit: industrialization—and in particular, black controlled industrialization—was understood as a necessary prerequisite to racial progress in the region.

By the mid-1970s, however, the organization's framing of its work had undergone something of a shift, albeit subtle, in both tone and content. Though not speaking for the work of the Delta Foundation as a whole, the manager of Fine Vines informed *Black Enterprise* that he was not “interested in the social implications ... but in running an

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

efficient business.”¹²³ Increasingly, black economic development had become simply development. As Bannerman put it on another occasion, the Foundation was not “in the sympathy market.” On another, he noted his preference for “skills and talents rather than race.”¹²⁴ He expected, perhaps naively, that the organization could produce businesses that could inhere to the benefit of the region as a whole. Resistance still remained, however. As Bannerman noted, “I’m a member of the Chamber of Commerce ... but I still haven’t been asked to join the local country club.”¹²⁵ On another occasion, another local Chamber of Commerce spent sizeable energy and resources in an attempt to prevent the establishment of Electro Controls, worrying that the black-owned company would inevitably signal the beginnings of labor organization in the region.¹²⁶ Perhaps more than anywhere else in the nation, the Delta was the place where the universal of “development” was most antithetical to the social order that had been constructed one hundred and fifty years ago. Though the Foundation and its work would endure, they remained—despite their political moderation—hamstrung by the fundamentally transformative implications of black-led modernization in the region.

In 1979, however, the Delta Foundation would lose its leading light. In that year, Charles Bannerman was appointed the Board of Directors of the Federal Home Loan Bank in Little Rock, Arkansas. As the press release announcing the appointment noted, he would be the first African American ever appointed to the position.¹²⁷ The loss was also a broader one for rural development efforts and black developmentalism. Over the

¹²³ “Delta Enterprises,” *Black Enterprise*, 117.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ DF, “For Immediate Release,” 18 January 1979, folder 1859, box 301, RG 3.1, RBF.

course of the 1970s, Bannerman had served as a member of the Southern Rural Development Task Force, sat on the board of both the Southern Cooperative Development Fund, and had been appointed co-chairman of the National Rural Center in Washington D.C. In accepting an award from the Rockefeller Foundation in April of 1976, Bannerman had received a standing ovation from the organization's trustees. In his address, he noted that while progress was indeed being made in the rural South, organizations such as the Delta Foundation still had a long way to go.¹²⁸

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the work of Delta Foundation at the Fine Vines apparel plant, a profile published in the organ of the Presbyterian Church, noted approvingly that:

The buzz, hum, and rattle of the converted military barracks outside of Greenville is the logical consequence of the civil rights movement of a decade ago; logical, but not inevitable, and to understand how sweet industrial sounds are, it is necessary to recollect the silence that settled over Mississippi after the shouting and shooting of the civil rights struggle.¹²⁹

In the main, however, the Mississippi Delta remained resistant to industrialization of any sort. Still reliant on agricultural production, the early 1980s saw the Delta economy once again rocked by falling land prices, declining exports, and environmental degradation. By the early 1990s, the Clinton administration had designated various areas of the Delta as “empowerment zones” and “enterprise communities.” A range of pro-business legislation, including employer tax credits and property tax reductions were implemented to encourage firms to settle in the still-impooverished Delta. Two organizations would be placed in charge of administering what became known as the Mid-Delta Empowerment

¹²⁸ “Mace Director Receives Rockefeller Award,” May 1976, folder 1857, box 301, RG 3.1, RBF.

¹²⁹ “Fine Vines is Doing Fine,” *Presbyterian Life* (May, 1972), folder 1855, box 301, RG 3.1, RBF.

Zone: the Delta Foundation and the Delta Council. In doing so, a much-changed, but in some respects still notably consistent liberal center finally acknowledged what it had long hoped to ignore: its simultaneous sponsorship of plantation economic interests and black development efforts. And as was the case in the 1930s, there remained profound asymmetries in power and resources between the two.¹³⁰ So went, in many respects, the history of black developmentalism.

¹³⁰ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 261-275.

CONCLUSION

Halfway Home and a Long Way to Go

In 1986, the Southern Growth Policies Board published a report that documented both the successes and limits of economic development in the South. *Halfway Home and a Long Way to Go: The Report of the 1986 Commission on the Future of the South* was prefaced by a speech given by Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton upon his 1985 appointment as Chairman of the Board. Now anointed as an apostle of southern growth, Clinton was optimistic about the future of his region. As he noted:

I believe that the kinds of economic and structural changes which have occurred may make it possible for us as a people to achieve for the very first time the economic status that the character and values and strength of our communities and our people merit.¹

Yet Clinton, much like the *Report* as a whole, remained almost silent on the racial inadequacies of regional growth. In fact, the Governor skillfully repurposed the meaning of black freedom struggle to race-neutral, pro-business ends. Recalling his vivid childhood memories of Martin Luther King's 1963 "I have a Dream" speech, Clinton noted that though he hoped southerners could "be judged by the content of their characters ... it will never happen until every child, by dint of his or her effort, can get a decent education and a decent, nationally competitive set of economic opportunities."²

¹ Bill Clinton, quoted in Southern Growth Policies Board (hereafter SGPB), *Halfway Home and a Long Way to Go: The Report of the 1986 Commission on the Future of the South* (Research Triangle Park, NC: Southern Growth Policies Board, 1986), 5.

² Clinton, quoted in SGPB, *Halfway Home*, 5.

Like the *Report on Economic Conditions of the South* half a century earlier, *Halfway Home and a Long Way to Go* centered region as the crucial unit of development. In a new economic world defined by capital mobility and economic globalization, the 1986 *Report's* conclusion argued that achieving development meant first and foremost recognizing that the South “is part of a complex nation and a shrinking world.”³ Failure to do so, the Report argued, would leave the region to “stand while a bustling world economy moves into the next century and leaves us behind ... We will continue to share a heritage, but our common future will be much darker than a Sunbelt ought to be.”⁴

In other respects, the *Report* echoed many of the themes that had animated African American development work in the post-civil rights era. “Pragmatic leaders with a global vision.” “Strengthen society as a whole by strengthening at-risk families.” “Home-grown business and industry.”⁵ All had, to varying degrees, been a part of the varied repertoire of black developmentalism. But the central space of such development work—the black rural South—remained largely insulated from the patterns of growth that had transformed other areas of the region. As recent statistical data has shown, deprivation has remained resilient in its spatial cast, hewing to black-dominated areas of the South that confirm, in their levels of poverty, median incomes, education and child malnutrition, the limits of both southern and national economic policies.⁶ If judged as a project of racial empowerment, black developmentalism was still far from its goals of

³ SGBP, *Halfway Home*, 30.

⁴ SGBP, *Halfway Home*, 30.

⁵ SGPB, *Halfway Home*, 17, 23, 27.

⁶ For recent data on economic inequality in the rural South, it is useful to refer to the Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, collected as recently as 2013. See <http://www.census.gov/did/www/saipe/>, accessed 21 January, 2015.

expanding the promise of democratic capitalism or, for the most part, making the “vital” liberal center—now ably represented by future President Bill Clinton—attentive to the consequences of American modernization. Black developmentalism was, to paraphrase the *Report*, a long way from home.

Nothing better exemplified this lamentable trajectory than the history of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. Initially authorized by Congress in 1946, the project was designed to link the Tennessee and Tombigbee rivers, providing a navigational shortcut between the mid-Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico.⁷



Map Courtesy of the Office of the District Engineer,
Mobile, Alabama

Fig. 6.1. Proposed path of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway.⁸

⁷ Jeffrey K. Stine, “Environmental Politics in the American South: The Fight over the Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway,” *Environmental History Review* 15:1 (1991), 2.

⁸ Image taken from Stine, “Environmental Politics,” 1.

The scale of the project was immense, entailing the largest earth-moving project in American history.⁹ It was, in short, an example of high modernist development reminiscent of the work of the Tennessee Valley Authority during the 1930s. But unlike the TVA, which serviced largely-white areas of the upper South, the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway was to cut a swathe through the Black Belt, bringing the developmental state to an area of the nation that it had previously left untouched.



Figure 6.2. Path of the Waterway through the Alabama and Mississippi Black Belt.¹⁰

⁹ Stine, "Environmental Politics," 5.

¹⁰ Image taken from Stine, "Environmental Politics," 4.

This fact did not go unnoticed by residents of the region, particularly those of whom had established ties to the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. Soon after the Waterway's groundbreaking in 1970, FSC staffers initiated efforts to determine the impact of the project of black life in the region. By the mid-1970s, a number of well-attended were conferences had been held with the goal, as the newly-formed Minority Peoples' Council (MPC) put it, of "assuring that minorities residing along the ... Waterway have the opportunity to participate in and benefit from ... a billion dollar federal public works project."¹¹

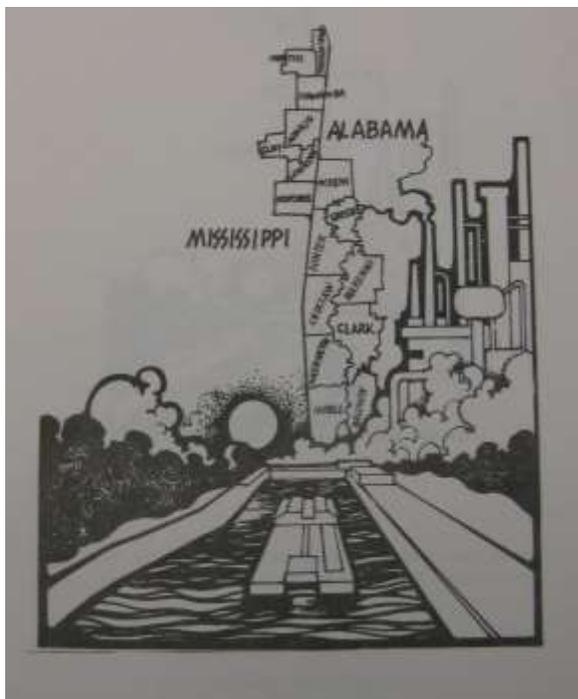


Figure 6.3. Minority People's Council Logo.¹²

¹¹ Federation of Southern Cooperatives, "First Year Program of the Minority People's Council," 24 May 1976, folder 2100, box 340, RG 3.1, Rockefeller Brothers Fund Papers (hereafter RBF).

¹² Image taken from "Third Annual People's Conference on the Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway," 31 January 1976, folder 2100, box 340, RG 3.1, RBF.

The Council's logo reflected the still-undiminished hope of rural black communities for economic modernization. Rising from the rural surrounds were smokestacks that, in a clear vision of industrial modernity and economic growth, indicated that the dream of development was still dearly held by residents of the rural and small town South.

Critical to the agenda of the Minority People's Council was the organization's call for representative black participation in the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority, a five-state development organization whose members were to be appointed by the Governors of Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Kentucky and Tennessee. Attempting to compel federal authority to supplant local intransigence, the MPC head Wendell Paris told the *Tuscaloosa News* that:

We call upon the federal government compliance agencies, EEOC, OFCC, Department of Defense Contracting Agency, Army Corps of Engineers, to implement the plan prepared by the people, the labor unions and contractors requiring adequate minority involvement before any additional contracts are let on the ... Waterway.¹³

Noting the clear lessons taught by other major development projects in the South, the MPC argued that historically "public works projects benefit most those who need help least and yield very little for disadvantaged and poor people."¹⁴ Such was the case in Alabama and Mississippi. Black participation in administration and construction of the Waterway, finally completed in 1984, proved minimal. Despite projections of an economic impact in excess of \$7 billion and 54,600 jobs by the year 2000, honest

¹³ Wendell Paris, quoted in "May Take Legal Action, Group Says," *Tuscaloosa News*, 31 Jan 1976.

¹⁴ Minority People's Council, "Proposal for Support of Employment and Economic Development Components from Comprehensive Human Resource and Economic Development Programs of the Minority People's Council on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway," May 1976, folder 2100, box 340, RG 3.1, RBF.

assessments of the project were forced to conclude that it had done little to foster the development in the region.¹⁵

As this study has shown, the history of black empowerment efforts in the rural South reveal the limits of developmental strategies to address racially and geographically bounded economic disparities that were, in fact, constitutive of southern economic development itself. Black developmentalism was, by its very nature, a heretical political project. Even as it embraced the universalizing logics and technocratic proscriptions of modern American liberalism, the effort necessarily called attention the ways in which race broadly, and the rural South more specifically, gave lie to the pretensions of democratic capitalism. All told, this is a history that through a seeming paradox—the presence of normative, proscriptive, modernizing impulses coursing through Black Power era political culture—should help scholars think in broader, more historical ways about how citizenship and modernity came to be defined in the years following the civil rights movement.

Finally, this study provokes a number of questions about the shape and drift of African American politics in the years following the civil rights movement. In part, the discursive landscape of American liberalism forced advocates of black developmentalism into advocating for empowerment projects in ways that came to obscure, over time, the substance of their initial critique. Once “development” became supplanted by “business” as the operative intellectual framework of such work, it was not long before understandings of racial capitalism began to lose salience in black political discourse. By the 1990s, notions of empowerment through enterprise had become foundational to anti-

¹⁵ “Waterway: A Way to More Jobs,” *Black Enterprise* (October 1978), 26.

poverty logics. The poor, in such a telling, are the victims of too little capitalism, rather than too much. We have, in many respects, returned to the heyday of modernization theory. Thus understanding the relationship between Black Power-era empowerment development efforts and modern understandings of inequality (including neoliberalism and post-racial ideologies) represents a major area for subsequent research and exploration. Finally, this history reveals much about the pitfalls of pursuing racial and economic justice in a liberal, pluralistic society. Black development workers acknowledgement of the historical and ongoing role of racism in shaping black economic livelihoods was, by its very nature, an argument that undermined the legitimacy of the developmental claim itself. Defining development as freedom, in effect, forced a reckoning with all that the modern liberal project could not admit.

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