

African-American Business Leaders in the South, 1810-1945: Business Success, Community Leadership and Racial Protest

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In 1957, the eminent black sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, leveled a devastating criticism at the African-American business community and the black bourgeoisie.

Lacking a cultural tradition and rejecting identification with the Negro masses on the one hand, and suffering from the contempt of the white world on the other, the black bourgeoisie has developed a deep-seated inferiority complex. In order to compensate for this feeling of inferiority, the black bourgeoisie has created in its isolation what might be described as a world of make-believe in which it attempts to escape the disdain of whites and fulfill its wish for status in American life. One of the most striking indications of the unreality of the social world which the black bourgeoisie created is its faith in the importance of "Negro business," i.e., the business enterprises owned by Negroes and catering to Negro customers [8].

Although Frazier stated the issue more bluntly and forthrightly than others, he was simply following upon an older tradition of criticism of the black business community that extended at least back to the 1930s. Abram Harris [11], opened up this line of critique and it was picked up by Gunnar Myrdall [26], in the 1940s. Frazier's basic arguments were later reiterated by Earl Ofari in his *Myth of Black Capitalism* in 1970 [29], and Manning Marable's *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* in 1983 [24]. There

¹This project is still in its very early stages, and should not be viewed as a finished product. The ideas are brought forward in this forum to invite comment and suggestions for direction. This paper is based on a research project examining black business in ten southern cities (Atlanta, Savannah, Nashville, Memphis, New Orleans, Durham, Birmingham, Richmond, Charleston, and Washington, D.C.) from 1880 to 1945. To provide some comparison, three northern cities (Philadelphia, Chicago, New York and St. Louis) were also analyzed.

are many aspects to this critique, several of which have at least some validity, but generally I think they have been unfairly overstated.

The most stinging criticism leveled at black business by Frazier and others is that it is simply not successful--that so-called black business success is really just a chimera or a charade created by conservative black apologists. Further, even if certain blacks have achieved individual success through business, this had done little to bring about the advancement of the entire group. Individual black wealth fails to filter down to the impoverished black masses. Nor, according to this critique, were these businesses significant employers of black labor

Scholars have also criticized black business on the political and social level. Black business, they claim, which had a vested interest in the maintenance of the segregated black ghetto, opposed movements for civil rights and integration. These observations appeared to be borne out in the 1960s, when studies of civil rights confrontations in several southern cities showed that the older black elite, including most of its business community, opposed more radical measures and tactics. Many analysts asserted that black business, which profited from racial segregation, had little desire in seeing the creation of a more integrated world. Therefore it was other groups, such as ministers and college students, who pushed for social change, while black business resisted those changes.

Finally, there was the charge, which extended back to the turn of the century, and revolved around Booker T. Washington and the National Negro Business League, that black business leaders were so dependent upon white support and white patronage, that even when they might have supported certain issues--increased voting rights, cessation of lynching, integration of public facilities--they were unwilling to use radical tactics to achieve them for fear of alienating influential whites. Again, the civil rights confrontations of the early 1960s seemed to confirm this, since when college students proposed sit-ins of restaurants and public facilities, the black elite recoiled in horror. To many of them, although integration might be a fine idea, this was the wrong way to go about it, and would cost blacks the support of liberal whites.

Although there is some truth to these accusations, I feel that they have given black business an undeservedly negative image. The role of black business leaders, at least in the period from around 1900 to World War II, was far different and more positive than many earlier analysts have been willing to concede. I would like to briefly address several of these issues.

Let us first of all look at the whole question of business success. There appear to be at least three aspects to the criticism of black business on this score. First, that black business is not really successful--that it is a pale imitation of white business--since there are no black General Motors or General Electric, etc. Second, they are not major employers of black labor, forcing the mass of blacks to continue to seek employment in the white world. And, third, most black businesses are doomed to failure.

These criticisms, I think, are founded upon a profound misunderstanding of the role and function of black business. Black businesses are "ethnic" businesses, and as such should be evaluated on that basis. What do we mean by an "ethnic business?" Scholars who have investigated the phenomenon [2,

6, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22,23, 24] generally agree that they operate primarily in the small business sector [1, 5, 7, 9, 26, 29, 33], are made up mostly of limited-scale, family-owned and operated firms which mainly employ co-ethnics, aside from family members. What are the implications of this fact for some of these criticisms?

First of all, it must be admitted that blacks have generally been less successful than immigrant ethnics in starting their own businesses. Although statistics on this are a bit scarce for the period of the first half of the twentieth century, studies of the 1970s and 1980s have demonstrated that blacks are far less likely than members of several recent immigrant groups to start their own business [12]. There are a few mitigating factors though. First of all, immigrants generally do better than native-born whites, indicating that the very fact of immigrating to a new country is a motivating factor; second, not all immigrant groups do equally well. In the past, Jews excelled and Italians did well, while the Irish did not. Recently, Chinese and Koreans have been very successful, whereas Mexicans and Filipinos have not. Students of this phenomenon conclude that there are two factors involved here: economic disadvantage in the mainstream job market and cultural traditions that prepare that particular group for business success. Thus, a group that is discriminated against and also has a tradition of business enterprise will do well. This could indicate, then, that the culture of the black community does not prepare its members well for business success.

There is, however, an additional factor. All of these studies take figures from the U.S. Census, which counts only traditional, legal enterprise. Nearly everyone who has studied the black community in the past or at the present is acutely aware of another, illegal, underground economy which has trafficked in alcohol, drugs, prostitution, numbers, gambling, and other items. Usually simply dismissed as criminal activity, these "occupations" probably attract the attention of some of the most entrepreneurially-minded members of the black community. If they were included in the totals, black business participation would increase dramatically [10, 16, 19, 20, 34].

Finally, as far as participation is concerned, it appears that another important factor is the availability of credit. Nearly all of the successful immigrant groups depend upon some sort of rotating credit associations among their group to provide credit. These were deeply rooted in the various immigrant communities, and demanded, in exchange for credit, two things from the receiver: first, he or she had to establish a reputation for trustworthiness in the community and also had to participate in a full range of community activities; second, once the loan was repaid and the business was prosperous, the businessman had to contribute to its capital fund for the next group of needy entrepreneurs. Blacks, for whatever reason, to my knowledge never developed this form of credit, relying instead on more traditional banks and savings and loan firms. They displayed a far more individualistic (perhaps American) attitude than other groups [15, 17, 21, 22, 23, 24]. This may again be counted as a cultural factor in the black community operating against a greater degree of black business participation.

What about the whole phenomenon of size? Although black businesses often serve as a means of mobility for individuals, virtually none of these

businesses grew to large size. Yet, it is important to recognize that this is highly characteristic of ethnic enterprise, indeed, of almost all small business. No one expects Italian-American or Korean-American businesses to become giant institutions. They are mostly small-scale, neighborhood-oriented concerns, providing needed services to the community. Why, then, expect that black ethnic businesses will somehow do things that no other ethnic businesses achieve? I would assert, in fact, that viewed in this light black business has probably created more large business enterprises than any ethnic group other than American Jews, and the latter is a special case. Because of the large capital resources of some German-Jewish banking families who came to America, Jews had access to community capital denied to other ethnic groups except the recent Hong Kong immigrants to Canada and the United States. Blacks, lacking this capital base, have nonetheless established several nationwide insurance companies, cosmetics, publishing and other firms.

What about longevity? Most black businesses are not particularly long-lived, and few become multi-generational enterprises. Again, we must remember that black businesses are characteristically small. As such, they suffer from all of the problems of small business operators: shortage of capital, inadequate business skills, and insufficient return on investment of time and money in relation to employment in the mainstream business world. Thus, the vast majority of small businesses have always been short-term affairs. Why should black business be any different? In fact, if one looks at black business in the period from 1900 to 1930 one is struck more by longevity than by failure. It is true that historical research tends to focus upon survivors, but it is important that in every city in my study there were some black businesses that survived several generations. This in itself is an impressive achievement.

In addition, we must look beyond the individual firm. The secret of business success in many immigrant communities is less individual than it is communitarian. Individual small businesses may come and go, and many do, but an important element is whether the community itself continues to be served by a core of ethnic enterprises. Although many firms undoubtedly did fail in the black community, the black business districts in these cities remained consistently viable from 1880 to 1945, and even managed to weather the depression rather impressively. There were a good number of multi-generation firms, and a lot of firms that lasted for several years, and then sold out to someone else. The end result was that the black business districts in these ten cities remained vibrant for about a half century, even if individual entities went under.

The phenomenon we see in black areas today of boarded-up, deserted hulks of buildings was just not true during most of this period. What caused the death of black business districts? Although it is true that integration in the 1960s was an important factor in the decline of these business districts, they were also killed by a couple of structural trends in the modern American city: urban renewal destroyed thousands of black residences on the nearby blocks, depleting the customer base, and uprooting many of the businesses. Also, the building of large suburban malls and the emergence of chain stores have hit smaller, family-owned downtown businesses of all types very hard since the 1950s.

What about the charge that black businesses are not major employers of black labor? This is true but again involves a serious misunderstanding of the role and function of ethnic business. With only a few exceptions, ethnic businesses have never been major employers of their own group. They hire mostly family members to work for them, and often this is unpaid labor. It is true that the Jewish-owned garment district in New York City at the turn of the century hired a large number of Jews, and in recent years some Asians have provided employment for significant numbers of their own group. This has been the exception; the pattern of black business has reflected the pattern of most ethnic enterprise.

Ethnic businesses, including African-American firms, are far more important as "community" institutions rather than simply as factors in a market nexus. In fact, I would argue that in the years under study they were at least as important as the church and various social organizations to their communities, if not more so. Black businesses were a fundamental part of what Michael Katz in *The Undeserving Poor* [14], has termed one of a series of "complex intersecting networks" which were a "key to survival by poor people in the past." He saw small ethnic businesses as critically important, since they were "local sources of credit . . . who sustained people they knew through the times they lacked cash."

Furthermore, these businesses were, as Jane Jacobs pointed out in her *Death and Life of Great American Cities* [13], the "eyes on the street." As such, they played a strategic social role in their communities in a variety of ways. Unlike middle class black professionals--teachers, lawyers and ministers--these owners of smaller black service establishments were integral parts of the "inner" black community. Although the businessmen most likely lived in a black middle class residential area with the professionals, their businesses were in the heart of the ghetto, and they had a constant and daily interaction with a "tough" element there that the rest of the middle class did all they could to avoid. Thus, the proprietors of these restaurants, barber shops, pool rooms, beauty parlors, and even funeral homes, were important meeting places that helped to define the very character of the black community.

These black business owners thus functioned as important bridges between the two cultures of the black community--that of the middle-class black professional on one hand and of the young men of the streets and countryside on the other. As such, they could often serve as social monitors who maintained a sense of stability, who helped determine and enforce community mores and values, and provided a moral core to the community. They interacted continually with passersby, exchanged gossip and news, and provided an informal forum wherein the actions of community members could be discussed, evaluated, and, if necessary, censured. In recent years, a number of scholars have theorized that the exodus of black-owned businesses from the black ghetto, along with the flight of the black middle class to the suburbs, has been the cause for the present-day pathology of crime and violence.

Simply by being there, even if they did not create large fortunes, or if they did not employ large numbers of blacks, black business served an essential community function--and this was their most important function.

This role, perhaps, also allows us to better understand the relationship of business leaders to the issues of civil rights and racial problems that emerged over the years.

African-American business leaders existed at a nexus of two powerful ideological currents. On one hand, as business leaders and relatively successful and well-paid individuals, they exhibited a class consciousness that tended to be quite conservative. That is, like most white business leaders, they were not comfortable with many goals and tactics that smacked of some kind of radicalism. In addition, they were suspicious of tactics that tended to be disruptive of the social equilibrium. Like most business leaders, their own success and survival was usually better served by maintenance of the status quo. It is this characteristic that historians have recognized, causing them to place black business leaders in the reactionary column.

This, however, ignores the other arm of the nexus--an enormously powerful race consciousness. These men and women were ferociously proud individuals, and were generally unwilling to accept any kind of racial slights to their person or their group. This, then, often worked at cross purposes to their conservative impulses, and on many issues these individuals found themselves being pulled in two directions. The results were rather complex. It depended both upon the saliency of the issue at hand, and the individual personality of the business leader, as to whether the conservative or more radical impulses would take command. Therefore, predictability was not high, and individual nuances were often quite subtle. In order to understand a little better some of what was going on, I would like to look at a number of issues and response to them over the period from the 1880s to the 1940s.

Racial pride was often expressed most graphically by black business leaders in enterprises that combined racial and capitalist endeavors. One of the most important of these was the National Negro Doll Company, started by Richard M. Boyd in Nashville sometime around 1908, and remaining profitably in business for some twenty years. When he began producing them, Boyd's son sent dolls to Emmett J. Scott, Booker T. Washington's aide, asking him to keep them as Christmas presents for his daughters, saying: "These we consider the very best playthings that could be offered for children of our own race. We are very desirous of having the endorsement of our leader (Washington)" [3].

Advertising the dolls in his newspaper, *The Nashville Globe*, Boyd [28] went even further in stressing the racial pride aspects:

These toys are not made of that disgraceful and humiliating type we have been accustomed to seeing black dolls made of. They represent the intelligent and refined Negro of today, rather than the type of toy that is usually given to children and as a rule used as a scarecrow.

Collier's Weekly commented on the dolls, saying: "There is more involved than appears on the surface in encouraging little Negro girls to clasp in their arms pretty copies of themselves. The white race doesn't monopolize all the beauty and loveableness, and it will be a happy day when this is realized."

Ironically, even the black hair-straightening and cosmetics firms, often viewed as attempting to make African-Americans more "white," also stressed a form of racial pride and solidarity. Madame C. J. Walker's firm, for example, insisted that blacks should "Add Beauty to Brains for Success" [31]:

Radiate an air of prosperity and who is to know if your purse is lined with gold or not? Personal cleanliness, neatness, whitened teeth, luxurious hair, a flawless complexion and dainty hands--these are the things that impress others and pave the way for your success by building confidence. Look your best. . . you owe it to your race.

A less ambiguous version of this race pride, coupled with feminist consciousness, was exhibited by Maggie Lena Walker in Richmond. As Elsa Barkeley Brown has commented, in all her business endeavors, Maggie Walker "demonstated in [her] own day the power of black women discovering their own strengths and sharing them with the whole community." This created what Brown called womanist praxis [4]. It was exhibited in the formation of such things as an insurance company, a bank, and a department store. When white merchants organized to destroy the department store, Walker retaliated: "There is a lion terrorizing us, preying upon us, and upon every business effort which we put forth. The name of this insatiable lion is PREJUDICE. . . the only way to kill the lion is to stop feeding it." In other words, stop patronizing white merchants and support the black department store.

In response to the Wilmington, N. C. race riot of 1898, when black political and business leaders were either killed or run out of town, John Merrick of Durham decided to found the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company. This could be seen as a purely accomodationist, conservative response, and in some respects it is, but it seems to me that there are other elements to it also. In announcing the formation of the insurance firm, Merrick tied it directly to what happened in Wilmington: "The Negroes have had lots of offices in this state and they have benefited themselves very little . . . Had the Negroes of Wilmington owned half the city . . . there wouldn't anything happened to them [to] to compare with what did. Let us think more of our employment and what it takes to keep peace and to build us a little house." That is, economic power, in Merrick's eyes, would give blacks the ability to withstand riots of this nature--and what happened time after time in the twentieth century gives some evidence of that, and I will return to that in a moment.

On a smaller, more personal scale, Richard Robert Wright, Sr. of Savannah, reacted in a similar way. When his daughter went into the Citizen's and Southern Bank in Savannah to conduct her business, the bank officer called her Julia instead of Miss Wright. When she requested she be called Miss like the white customers, the officer screamed "I am a white man and I call no nigger Miss." He then kicked her, and she hit him back. The elder Wright (who was president of Savannah State College for blacks) was furious, and demanded an apology from the bank. When this was not forthcoming, he left his post at the college, moved to Philadelphia, and with his son started a

bank there--which he called Citizens and Southern out of spite. It became a very important institution in that city for nearly 40 years until it passed into white hands. One of the goals of the bank was to provide capital to blacks for homes and businesses, capital not available from white institutions. This, again, was a form of economic retaliation.

Because of their race pride, these black business leaders were often willing to use or advocate quite aggressive, and sometimes even violent, responses to perceived threats and slights. A key factor here, though, is that there were almost always "defensive" reactions. That is, the stability of the community and of the race was perceived to be threatened by the actions of whites. In this context, black business leaders could become uncompromisingly radical in their actions. Yet, if they were asked to support similar violent or aggressive actions designed to disrupt or revolutionize the existing situation they were usually far less willing to go along.

John Mitchell, Jr., editor and publisher of the *Richmond Planet*, and a prominent businessman and banker in the city, took a militantly uncompromising attitude against lynching in the South during its expansion in the 1890s. Mitchell typified the race pride of many black business leaders of this time, and the logo of his newspaper showed a powerful black arm with flexed biceps and a clenched fist, symbolizing the strength of the black community. In response to lynchings, Mitchell continually exhorted blacks to resort to armed self defense, saying: "The best remedy for a lyncher or a cursed night rider is a 16-shot Winchester rifle in the hands of a Negro with enough nerve to pull the trigger." For ten years he conducted this crusade in a similar vein until he finally bowed to realities and began tempering the militance of his response. He then turned to using what some have termed a more "accommodationist" response of developing black business to counter the influence of the white community. The fact that he took a moderate stance on political issues, and on lynching, however, did not imply acquiescence. Like his fellow Richmondite, Maggie Walker, Mitchell wanted to use black business to build a strong and independent black community.

Similarly, attempts by whites to impose segregation and Jim Crow cars on the street railways of the South were met by boycott attempts from the 1870s to the early twentieth century. In nearly every instance these boycotts were organized and sustained primarily by members of the black business community. Mitchell was a leader of the boycotts in Richmond, Richard Boyd and other black business leaders not only organized a similar boycott in Nashville, but also organized their own traction firm to supercede the white organization. There were similar attempts in Atlanta, Savannah, Memphis and other cities, all dominated by the black business elite. Although these movements ultimately failed, they stood as striking examples of aggressive black response to growing white racism, a response that was largely spearheaded by black business leaders.

Most dramatic, and largely unrecognized, though, was the role black business leaders played in the response to a series of race riots during the first half of the twentieth century. The first of these came in Atlanta in 1906. In this instance, white mobs began attacking defenseless blacks in the downtown area. A day later, these white mobs descended upon a black middle and upper

class enclave, intending to wreak violence. They were met with armed response by these blacks, who they were obviously not "riff raff" or street people, and the rumor held that the Howard Funeral Home was using empty caskets to bring massive caches of arms into the black community to arm the entire population. Although the police took action against the blacks and joined with whites to put down black resistance, this set a pattern for several later race riots. Atlanta was the first time that blacks made an armed stand against white rioters and lynchers. Significantly this response appeared to depend upon the creation of a viable black business community. Although black ghettos existed prior to this, the creation of a black business district in Atlanta after the 1880s provided the organizational nexus for armed black response.

In Washington, D. C. in 1919, mobs of white soldiers and sailors began attacking blacks in various parts of the city, and then announced they were going to attack the black "U Street" business district and burn it to the ground. When they arrived they were met by a well-armed black populace that was commanded by the black business leaders of the area. They were successful in repelling the white mobs, even though the police again took the side of the whites. Similarly, in Tulsa in 1921, when a white mob tried to lynch a black World War I veteran, he was rescued by a group of blacks, who then fled to the black business district to make their stand against the armed white mob. Here again, the black businessmen were key leaders and organizers of this action.

As America entered World War II, blacks became increasingly unwilling to suffer white racism and aggression. There were a whole series of incidents throughout the South during this time--esp. Columbia, South Carolina in 1941 and Nashville, Tennessee in 1943-- in which funeral parlor and restaurant owners were leaders in movements to counteract white actions. Finally, in Columbia, Tennessee in 1946, various black business owners were leaders in an action designed to stop the attempted lynching of two respected blacks in the community. They spirited the two men out of jail, hid them in the center of the black community, armed the inhabitants to forestall a white invasion. Some of these actions are little known, but the pattern is at least fairly clear--black business leaders, full of race pride and a willingness to defend their community and their own homes and businesses, were willing to take very aggressive and even violent action in a defensive mode.

There are other episodes that are more difficult to categorize. In 1937, for example, Charles C. Spaulding, then president of North Carolina Mutual, was faced with a severe crisis. In that year, when Joe Lewis became the first black heavyweight champion since Jack Johnson, Durham's blacks took to the streets to celebrate. Before long, however, the joyous celebration gave way to an expression of the pent-up rage and anger of the black community against whites. Blacks began racing around the streets in their cars, hurling rocks and shouting insults at whites. On hearing of this, Spaulding took to the streets with his chauffeur driving the car and Spaulding riding the running board. He sped through the black community, calling the angry blacks by their first names, and imploring them to return to their homes. This was, on the surface, exactly the kind of conservative activity that black business leaders are

continually accused of by scholars. Yet, there are other factors to be considered. First of all, Spaulding himself said that he feared a racial holocaust on the part of whites if blacks continued their activities. Second, Spaulding had for some years been negotiating with the white power establishment to lift restrictions in the state to black voting. He was subsequently able to use this threat of a black riot, and his own "cooling of tensions," to great effect. It was a critical turning point in the securing voting rights for blacks in North Carolina by the early 1940s, long before it came in most other Southern states.

There are a myriad of these incidents throughout the twentieth century. Black business leaders, conservative, cautious individuals who did not like labor unions, socialism, or other radical organizations, and were also sometimes nervous about "disruptions," "rabble," and the like, were nonetheless impelled to take radical and aggressive actions time and again because of their tremendous race pride. In a myriad of ways, these men and women provided leadership to the black communities of their city and nation on a multitude of levels.

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