Out of the Shadows: Business Enterprise and African American Historiography

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In recent decades, there has been a virtual explosion of historical works relating to the African American experience. Yet, in the midst of this long-overdue recognition of blacks by scholars, the dynamics of historic African American business enterprise remains relatively obscure. This essay will cite and critique three primary reasons why black businesses and businesspeople have been under-represented in African American historiography. First, there has existed a pervasive belief that black business, historically, represented an unprogressive element of black community life. This attitude, which can be described as the black businessman as "villain" thesis, contributed to a long-standing dismissal of black business enterprise as worthy of serious examination. Second, even when black businesses were considered, their activities were analyzed in a non-comparative vacuum which unduly diminished their significance. Finally, the "racial integration" and "Civil Rights" paradigms of the 1950s and 60s, which focused upon black movement into the American "mainstream," further marginalized community-based black business enterprise.

For years, the anti-black business scholarly tradition impeded a serious assessment of historic black business enterprise. Significantly, this school of thought, despite the vehemence of its arguments and the prominence of its proponents, appears replete with faulty assumptions and outright sloppy scholarship. The first major anti-black business treatise, Abram Harris' 1936 book *The Negro As Capitalist: A Study of Banking and Business*, exemplified how ideology can sometimes cloud analytical precision.

Written during the midst of the Great Depression, *The Negro As Capitalist* reflected contemporary anti-business sentiment in America. Among other things, Harris found considerable fault with black businessmen's apparent self-serving promotion of racial solidarity. As James O. Young noted in *Black Writers of the Thirties*, Harris, along with his then-Howard University colleagues Ralph Bunche and Edward Franklin Frazier, firmly believed in the possibilities of inter-racial trade unionism. Consequently, this trio considered black business development as an irrelevancy that kept the black working class from linking with their white counterparts [Young, 1973, pp. 35-63].

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of *The Negro As Capitalist* was its direct association of black business with an exploitative black middle class.

BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC HISTORY, Volume twenty-six, no. 1, Fall 1997.
 ISSN 0894-6825.

Harris, using this model of African American community development, concluded that the black middle class promoted racial pride and unity as a subterfuge to elicit black mass support for middle class-controlled businesses [Harris, 1936, pp. 49-50]. He also suggested that black businessmen were responsible for anti-Semitism among African Americans. Harris, in reference to black businessmen's complaints about Jewish competition, concluded:

> In their confusion, the masses are led to direct their animus against the Jew and against whiteness. The real forces behind their discomfort are masked by race which prevents them from seeing that what the Negro businessman wants most of all is freedom to monopolize and exploit the market they provide. They cannot see that they have no greater exploiter than the black capitalist who lives upon low-waged if not sweated labor, although he and his family may and often do, live in conspicuous luxury [Harris, 1936, p. 184].

Harris' observations, despite their vivid imagery, represented a Marxist rhetorical flourish rather than careful scholarly analysis. An examination of U.S. Census data all but dispels the notion of a (numerically significant) predatory African American employer class. For instance, in 1929, the Census Bureau enumerated 25,701 black retail enterprises with net sales of $101,146,043. The average net sales for these 25,701 black retail establishments was $3,935. This compared to average annual net sales of over $32, 000 for the 1,513,592 white-owned American retail establishments [Hall, 1935, pp. 496-498]. Also, the 25,701 black retail enterprises employed only 12,561 full-time employees (excluding proprietors) [Hall, 1935, p. 497]. Consequently, even if Harris' assertions contained a modicum of truth, it appears the majority of African American enterprises during this period were either single proprietorships or tenuous partnerships and corporations.

Besides Harris' questionable assertions concerning the scope and avarice of black business enterprises, his assumptions about historic African American racial solidarity appeared untenable. Harris viewed late nineteenth century African American history as a period characterized by the black middle class' attempt to establish themselves as an employer class based upon the white capitalist model [Harris, 1936, p. 49]. To Harris, the important 1898 Atlanta University Conference on Negro Business, which promoted group solidarity and equated racial progress with business progress, represented a means by which the black elite sought black mass support for an elite-controlled black economy.

Harris' denigration of African American racial solidarity, based upon his interpretation of late nineteenth century African American history, appeared based upon ahistorical assumptions. Harris, while vehement in his criticism of the black elite, remained curiously silent concerning turn of the twentieth century white American racism. As many scholars have documented, African Americans were literally besieged by white hostility during this period. Considering that blacks had been abandoned by northern Republican politicians, that the Populist Movement's brief inter-racial period had disintegrated, and that

organized labor scorned African American workers, it seemed that blacks had few, if any, feasible options other than increased racial solidarity. Thus, the 1898 Atlanta University Conference on Negro Business' emphasis upon racial economic cooperation appeared reasonable considering the circumstances.

Despite serious inconsistencies, *The Negro As Capitalist* profoundly affected subsequent research relating to historic black business enterprises. Not surprisingly, later anti-black business treatises, similar to their flawed progenitor, were fraught with questionable assumptions and conclusions. Ralph Bunche's 1940 Research Memorandum for the Carnegie-Myrdal Study, entitled "The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics, and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations," provided another example of the shortcomings associated with the black businessman as "villain" thesis.

A substantial section of Bunche's essay dealt with the National Negro Business League (NNBL) founded by Booker T. Washington in 1900. Bunche, after summarizing NNBL history and describing certain local chapters' community improvement projects, inexplicably concluded: "...despite his appeal to race pride and loyalty, the Negro businessman is not distinguished by his civic-mindedness, his efforts and sacrifices on behalf of his group" [Bunche, 1940, p. 317].

Bunche's strange line of reasoning, considering the evidence that he presented, graphically illustrated his tunnel vision concerning black businesspeople. He and Abram Harris, both African American scholars, would have felt insulted by white racists seeking to characterize all blacks as lazy and shiftless. Yet, they eagerly perpetuated a stereotypical characterization of black business. Moreover, Edward Franklin Frazier, the third member of the influential Howard University anti-black business triumvirate, ultimately presented the black businessperson as "villain" thesis to an even wider audience.

Few scholarly studies have attracted the widespread attention and discussion that accompanied the 1957 publication of Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie.* Still, despite the hoopla generated by this book, *Black Bourgeoisie* appeared seriously flawed.

Professor Frazier, in *Black Bourgeoisie's* preface, noted that "it was not my intention to make a comparative study" [Frazier, 1957, p. 13]. This decision resulted in gross distortion. For instance, Frazier described black business as "...one of the main elements in the world of make-believe which the black bourgeoisie has created to compensate for its feeling of inferiority in a white world dominated by business enterprise" [Frazier, 1957, p. 129]. Although Frazier's assertions contained an element of truth, a translated survey of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Chicago foreign language newspapers disputes his notion that African American businessmen were afflicted with a unique, racially-based neurosis.

The *Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey (CFLPS),* compiled by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1942, clearly indicates that immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, similar to African Americans, viewed internal business development as a positive goal. Moreover, these same groups regarded ethnic business development as a prerequisite for full

"acceptance" in America. For example, the December 14, 1910 issue of *Dziennik Zwiñazkowy*, a daily Polish newspaper, featured an editorial entitled "Polish Trade" which asserted:

> Individual wealth in trade, commerce, and agriculture is the wealth of the whole nation. If our people do not develop agriculture, trade, and commerce in this country as others have developed them, then our lot will always be hard labor in factories, coal mines, forests, and city streets... Wherever we turn in the larger American centers, we notice huge stores and million dollar skyscrapers, packed from top to bottom with articles of every description. We notice gigantic factories, railroads, electric and gas plants, streetcar lines, and every branch of trade and commerce – vast wealth. But all this is in the hands of strangers... We must understand that only through mutual strength and support can we hope to raise Polish industry and commerce in America to a place where it will be at least equal to that of strangers [*CFLPS*, microfilm roll #49].

If the Poles and other southern and eastern European immigrants viewed the establishment of a voluntary internal business structure as necessary, one can plausibly assume that African Americans would have sought to establish an internal business community even *without* the imposition of legalized racial segregation. Exploring this assumption opens up new areas of consideration.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even without being subjected to "Jim Crow" apartheid, recently freed blacks, similar to newly arrived immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, would have faced a competitive society grounded in the principles of Social Darwinism. In a "dog eat dog world" where "only the strong survive," group and individual survival were all-consuming preoccupations. Significantly, both African Americans and eastern and southern European immigrants came to the conclusion that ethnic economic development, based upon mutual cooperation, would greatly assist their respective quests for survival.

Examples of this sentiment abound in the *CFLPS*. For instance, *Ukrainia*, a weekly Ukrainian newspaper, asserted the following in a September 20, 1919 article entitled "The First Ukrainian Factory in Chicago":

> We urge the directors of this corporation to instruct our Ukrainians to be more interested in the economic field, for this is the only way to help indirectly the Ukrainian national cause... We should leave off quarrels and bickerings among ourselves and strive to establish clean Ukrainian enterprises, cooperatives, savings banks, etc. When we are stronger economically and industrially, should any of us return to his native country, these enterprises could be left in the hands of our countrymen and not go into the hands of outsiders [*CFLPS*, microfilm roll #67].

In a similar vein, the December 9, 1932 issue of *Osadnâe Hlasy*, a weekly Slovak newspaper, featured an article entitled "Patronize the Stores of Your Countrymen." Among other things, Chicago Slovaks were told:

> The slogan, "patronize the stores of your countrymen," is well known to us. However, we do not act accordingly. There are many reasons why we should patronize the stores of our Slovak people. Give preference to them and not to strangers, who will not come to your aid in time of need. These people may be your enemies. We can look at this matter from a variety of different angles, but there should never be any doubt as to the decision to patronize the business establishments of our own people... Our patronage helps their business to grow and consequently our ideals become a reality [*CFLPS*, microfilm roll #62].

In the context of the *Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey*, historic proponents of African American business development, most notably Booker T. Washington, appear to merit serious reconsideration. Traditionally, Washington's critics have asserted that his emphasis upon black economic development, in lieu of seeking political empowerment, represented a capitulation to white racism [DuBois, 1903, pp. 41-59; Broderick, 1959, pp. 62-77]. Undoubtedly, some aspects of his public career can be described as an exercise in accommodation [Lane, 1971, pp. 90-109]. Still, Washington's promotion of internal African American business activity, similar to the pro-ethnic business sentiment expressed in the *Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey*, had militant, nationalistic, connotations. This seems borne out by the fact that Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, two of the most significant black nationalist organizations of the twentieth century, featured internal economic development as the cornerstone of their programs.

Speaking of Marcus Garvey, it is significant (and perhaps ironic), that the *Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey* provides assistance in placing his business aspirations in proper historical perspective. Traditionally, Garvey's economic ideas have been overlooked in favor of examining the part of his program that sought to assist transplanted Africans (in the Western Hemisphere) who wanted to return to their ancestral homeland. Researchers caught up in Garvey's admittedly bombastic rhetoric concerning "Africa for the Africans," have concentrated upon the transportation component of the UNIA's most noteworthy and controversial project, the Black Star Line [Cronin, 1955, pp. 77-78]. While this steamship line had an auxiliary role of transporting disgruntled blacks in the African diaspora back to their "Motherland," its primary projected role was to link together an independent, black international economy created by Garvey's less well-known Negro Factories Corporation.

Significantly, even those scholars aware of Garvey's larger economic aims have focused upon his limitations as a manager rather than the overall feasibility of his plans [Martin, 1986, pp. 151-167; Stein, 1986, pp. 61-88; Hill,

1987, pp. 362-363; Lewis, 1988, p. 69]. While the likelihood of constructing an independent, Pan-African economic structure remains extremely visionary, the *Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey* suggests that Garvey's aspirations mirrored those of some European American immigrant communities.

A few ethnic enclaves, according to the *CFLPS*, were involved with internal trans-Atlantic chambers of commerce which sought to link businessmen on both sides of the ocean. For example, the December 10, 1926 issue of *Dziennik Zjednoczenia*, another Chicago Polish daily newspaper, featured an article about an organization called the "Polish Merchant Association." This group's primary concern, according to *Dziennik Zjednoczenia*, was to select delegates for a May, 1927 convention of the Polish International Merchants Association to be held in Warsaw [*CFLPS*, Microfilm roll #49]. Apparently, Chicago delegates to this meeting established valuable contacts with their business counterparts in Poland. This seems borne out by an October 10, 1927 article in *Dziennik Zjednoczenia* entitled "A Meeting of the Chicago Polish Chamber of Commerce." This essay, besides announcing an upcoming meeting of the organization, stated "...[A]ll members and particularly those interested in making business contacts with the merchants of Poland, are requested to be present" [*Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey*, Microfilm roll #54].

Besides the Poles, Chicago Swedes and Norwegians actively sought to establish commercial ties with their countrymen in Europe. The April 24, 1913 edition of *Svenska Kurien*, a weekly Swedish newspaper, featured an article entitled "The Proposed Swedish American Line Boosted," which spoke of preliminary plans to establish a steamship line that would link Sweden with the United States [*Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey*, Microfilm roll #63]. Significantly, in a May 7, 1913 follow-up story, *Svenska Kurien* sadly reported that:

> Very few of our countrymen attended the meeting held at the Swedish club the other day to consider whether action should be taken in regard to signing up for shares in the new Swedish-American Line. Director Charles S. Patterson acted as chairman. Ten persons signed up for $138,500 [*CFLPS*, Microfilm roll #63].

Despite Chicago Swedes' apparent lack of widespread support for a commercially-oriented steamship line, their interest in maintaining business ties with Sweden did not diminish. This seemed confirmed by a January 15, 1920 *Svenska Kurien* article which noted the existence of a Chicago Swedish Chamber of Commerce, as well as its desire to promote cultural and economic relations between Sweden and the United States [*CFLPS*, Microfilm roll #64].

Compared to the Poles and the Swedes, transplanted Norwegians, including those in Chicago, appeared to have taken the notion of a trans-Atlantic commercial link the most seriously. Excerpts from the daily Chicago Norwegian newspaper *Skandinaven* bore this out. In its May 15, 1915 edition, *Skandinaven* published an article entitled "A Norwegian Chamber of Commerce." Chicago Norwegians were informed that:

> A meeting was held at the Odin Club for the purpose of forming a Norwegian Chamber of Commerce. This Chamber should create a closer industrial relationship between Norway and the United States...This dual Chamber should be able to discover what goods are most needed in both countries and how these goods can be most cheaply marketed...Committees have been formed in America and Norway. Chicago, New York, Seattle, and Minneapolis have already laid the foundation for this move [*CFLPS*, Microfilm roll #45].

Two years later, *Skandinaven's* July 25, 1917 issue included an article about a recent stockholders meeting of a trans-Atlantic Norwegian corporation called the Norwegian American Line. With undisguised pride, *Skandinaven* noted that, "the directors' message to the meeting gives evidence to a year of high earnings. The corporation now has ten ships in operation" [*CFLPS*, Microfilm roll #44].

Considering the trans-Atlantic aspirations of the Norwegians, Swedes, and Poles, Garvey's trans-Atlantic aspirations must be seen in a different light. Specifically, the UNIA's economic aims, rather than representing the singular delusions of a megalomaniac, appear to indicate another commonality shared by business-minded African Americans and their European American counterparts.

Although inward business development remained a focal point of both African and European American enclaves during the first decades of the twentieth century, after World War II, the country's social landscape began to change dramatically. Accelerated inter-marriage among various European ethnic groups blurred earlier cultural distinctiveness. Consequently, calls for separate Polish, Ukranian, and Slovak business development (in the United States) diminished dramatically [Olson, 1994, pp. 226-230]. While there was not a corresponding increase in intermarriage across racial lines, post World War II America witnessed an increased African American demand for the desegregation of public facilities. As blacks began to explore new opportunities outside the boundaries of the African American community, black-owned businesses, which historically were based within African American neighborhoods, found themselves increasingly marginalized. Moreover, African American businesses appeared totally unprepared to deal with this changing socio-economic reality. A brief survey of Chicago's early to mid-twentieth century black community provides insight into this important phenomenon.

Chicago's African American population, because of the near constant migration of southern blacks to the "Windy City," grew from 44,103 to 812,637 between 1910 and 1960 [Hirsch, 1983, p. 17]. The availability of good paying jobs in the city's industrial sector contributed mightily to this occurrence.

Despite being welcome as workers, southern black migrants to Chicago found they did not leave residential racial segregation behind them. Still, the existence of clearly delineated racial (neighborhood) boundaries in Chicago did not overly concern black newcomers. During the first decades of the twentieth

century, African Americans did not move to Chicago and other northern cities necessarily seeking a more racially integrated atmosphere. Black southerners came North primarily for better economic, educational, and political opportunities. Moreover, many black migrants to Chicago, because of their previous negative experiences with southern whites, consciously sought to keep their contact with northern whites to a bare minimum [Johnson, 1940, pp. 2-3]. This tendency, among other things, contributed to the proliferation of black-owned businesses in Chicago.

Besides the inclination of many black migrants to confine most of their non-working activities within the African American community, newcomers to "Bronzeville" (black Chicago's nickname) were regularly urged to support black Chicago institutions, especially businesses. St. Clair Drake's unpublished 1940 research memorandum for the Carnegie/Myrdal Study entitled "The Negro Church and Associations in Chicago" explored this phenomenon.
Among other things, Drake discovered:

> The central concept in thinking of Negroes seems to be "The Race." Variously referred to as "Our Group," "We Negroes," "Our People," "Aunt Hagar's Children," "Afro-Americans," "Colored Americans," etc., this concept carries with it the idea that Negroes should form a community, that they have a tradition and destiny... The dogma of racial solidarity is assiduously preached by all agencies in the community, from the pulpits, through the press and by advertising. The most articulate section of the Negro community uses slogans of "Race Pride" "Race Solidarity" to motivate reform, secure patronage for business, to corral votes, and to advance personal ends [Drake, 1940, p. 261].

Two literary examples of the activity Professor Drake described were a 1927 community yearbook entitled *The Negro in Chicago, 1779-1927* and a 1947 publication entitled *Scott's Blue Book: A Classified Business and Service Directory of Greater Chicago's Colored Citizens' Commercial, Industrial, Professional, Religious, and Other Activities.*

The Washington Intercollegiate Club, an organization affiliated with the all-black Wabash Ave. YMCA, produced *The Negro in Chicago, 1779-1927* [Wabash Ave. YMCA, March 16, 1927]. This publication featured a Bronzeville business directory as well as a "Who's Who" section. Moreover, while *The Negro in Chicago, 1779-1927* cited the accomplishments of black Chicago entrepreneurs, it also featured striking captions with such messages as "Develop Your Economic Possibilities" and "Be A Producer As Well As A Consumer" [Robb, 1927, pp. 183, 185]. In addition, this community yearbook noted that many black businesses in Chicago were operated by educated migrants dissatisfied with employment opportunities in "mainstream" Chicago industry and business [Robb, 1927, p. 183].

The 1947 edition of *Scott's Blue Book* represented both a high point of Bronzeville business visibility, as well as a classic example of how black

Chicagoans were imbued with a sense of business-oriented racial solidarity. *Scott's* 1947 edition featured 338 pages of advertisements and stories related to black business in Chicago. Black newcomers to Bronzeville, especially, must have been truly impressed with the wide variety of black-owned businesses in the Windy City. By 1947, Chicago blacks not only operated such "traditional" enterprises as beauty and barber shops, restaurants, and grocery stores, but also furriers, golf instruction schools, ice cream manufacturing plants, massage parlors, and a riding stable [*Scott's Blue Book: A Classified Business and Service Directory of Greater Chicago's Colored Citizens' Commercial, Industrial, Professional, Religious, and Other Activities*, 1947, pp. 180-182, 184, 207, 227, 278].

Besides exposing black Chicagoans to the wide range of commercial enterprises operated by local African Americans, *Scott's* strongly urged Bronzeville residents to support these businesses. For instance, the 1947 *Blue Book* noted: "the most cordial reception awaits you at these shops. They are YOUR shops. Opened for YOUR convenience and catering largely to YOUR individual need and comfort. When planning a purchase, won't YOU visit them FIRST? YOU ARE ALWAYS WELCOME [*Scott's Blue Book*, 1947, p. 28].

Ironically, within a few years, *Scott's Blue Book* assumed an entirely different public posture. Stimulated by the historic 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, which outlawed school segregation and set the stage for the total dissolution of U.S. apartheid, the 1956 edition of *Scott's Blue Book* sought to reflect African Americans' increased interest in impending racial desegregation. The publication's transformation provides a clear window to view black business' muddled response to a changing social reality.

Whereas the 1947 edition of *Scott's Blue Book* presented an unabashed appeal for racial solidarity, the 1956 edition abandoned its earlier racial exhortations. In fact, this later publication featured the racially neutral title *Scott's Blue Book: Business and Service Directory of Chicago's Citizens: With Inter-racial Features.*

Significantly, readers of the 1956 *Scott's Blue Book* would have been hard-pressed to find any "Inter-racial Features." All of the businesses and professionals listed in this publication were black. Consequently, this edition's "inter-racialism" appeared to be merely rhetorical rather than factual.

The confusion exhibited by the 1956 *Scott's Blue Book* regarding the mission and scope of Bronzeville businesses ultimately harmed the position of black business in Chicago. Before the mid-1950s, black businesspersons were, perhaps, the most respected segment of Chicago's black community. Yet, as sentiment for racial integration mounted, black-owned businesses, because of their lack of preparation for such an eventuality, abdicated a considerable portion of their community leadership role. Bronzeville businesses, which at one time proudly proclaimed their "racial mission," appeared by the late 1950s to be uncertain and timid about their role in black Chicago. Moreover, their seeming inability or unwillingness to imbue late 1950s black consumers with a sense of economic racial loyalty would have (for them) dramatically negative consequences. When white-owned companies began to accelerate their marketing of products within the African American community during the 1960s [Weems,

1994, pp. 94-107], many black consumers, sensing no viable alternative, felt no special compulsion to resist corporate America's blandishments.

During the early 1960s, the evolving Civil Rights Movement helped African Americans achieve important gains in the areas of education, employment, voting rights, and accessibility to public accommodations and facilities. Moreover, as blacks increased their focus on opportunities outside of traditional African American enclaves, community-based black enterprise appeared increasingly anachronistic. Yet, as George S. Harris, the president of the black-owned Chicago Metropolitan Mutual Assurance Company, noted in an important 1965 speech, the Civil Rights Movement's apparent denigration of black business enterprise seemed short-sighted and counterproductive. He specifically declared:

> I know that many advances have been made in the opening of new avenues and new levels of employment for Negroes. Well and Good. But this is only one side of economic democracy. While we have fought hard for advancement as Employees, we are not fulfilling our mission, our place in the sun, as Employers. Economic Democracy is no one-way street... What I am trying to say is that we are waging some pretty effective campaigns in the direction of over-all civil rights, while neglecting our potential as employers and entrepreneurs... Full equality to me includes the right to Hire, not just to be Hired: the power to own the company, not just work for the company. If we can make appreciable gains in this struggle, we will increase the self-respect and the self-dignity of the Negro people a hundred-fold [Harris, 1965, p. 8].

Ongoing economic problems within the African American community, a full generation after the passage of 1960s civil rights legislation, suggests the wisdom of Harris' observations. Moreover, the negative consequences of the Civil Rights Movement's lack of an economic agenda, or what African American social critic Harold Cruse referred to as "non-economic liberalism" [Cruse, 1987, pp. 235, 293-297], has prompted a gradual reassessment of black business' historic role in America.

Among historians, Walter B. Weare's 1973 book, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company,* represented a major turning point in the historiography of black-owned businesses. Although he did not mention them by name, Weare's thoughtful depiction of North Carolina Mutual's historical development cast considerable doubt upon the validity of the long-standing black businessperson as "villain" thesis.

Weare, among other things, asserted that historic black businesses were noteworthy because of their unique entrepreneurial impulse to "merge business with benevolence" [Weare, 1973, p. 7]. Moreover, Weare described North Carolina Mutual as being "economically backward and socially advanced" [Weare, 1973, pp. 100-101]. Significantly, Weare did not attribute these characteristics of black business to being based primarily upon altruism. Such an

interpretation of historic black business development would have been just as distorted as the black businessman as "villain" thesis. Weare correctly viewed North Carolina Mutual and other historic black businesses' relative preoccupation with social responsibility as directly linked to their perceived roles as community improvement institutions [Weare, 1973, pp. 137-138].

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many municipal, state, and federal government agencies deliberately ignored their black constituencies. Thus, historic black businesses, hoping to fill this void, sought to promote intra-community economic cooperation as a means to alleviate the "burden of race" (being black in a hostile white-controlled society). Consequently, companies such as North Carolina Mutual viewed themselves not simply as private corporations, but as institutions in the forefront of a racial "mission" to survive in a hostile environment.

Alexa Benson Henderson's 1990 study of the black-owned Atlanta Life Insurance Company mirrored Weare's earlier assessment of the motivation for black business enterprise. Professor Henderson's book, whose subtitle described Atlanta Life as a "Guardian of Black Economic Dignity," placed this company's establishment and development within the context of "a heritage of mutual aid" [Henderson, 1990, pp. 1-19].

My 1996 book, *Black Business in the Black Metropolis: The Chicago Metropolitan Assurance Company, 1925-1985*, further verifies Weare's assertions concerning the racial "mission" stimulus for black business development [Weems, 1996, pp. 56-70]. Yet, while it is important to determine the motivating factors behind the establishment of historic African American businesses, it is perhaps more important to determine how these businesses reflected the constituencies they served. To again cite from Walter B. Weare's milestone study, "one hopes...that through the eyes of a single institution, even with a distorted one-dimensional view, there can emerge useful insights on the larger black community that otherwise might not appear" [Weare, 1973, p. viii].

Just as Weare's study of North Carolina Mutual further illuminated our knowledge of southern black life during the early twentieth century, my examination of the Chicago Metropolitan Assurance Company sought to, among other things, depict the adjustment of southern black migrants to life in a large northern center. This suggests that persons interested in examining historic African American enclaves can benefit from using a local black business as a focal point. For example, anyone interested in the history of blacks in Los Angeles could use the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, established in 1925, as a means to ascertain the dynamics of community development. This suggestion is validated by the fact that black insurance companies, during the first half of the twentieth century, were primary sources of mortgage loans and venture capital for African Americans [*Negro Insurance Week*, 1947, p. 14].

Perhaps the greatest strength of recent attempts to bring business enterprise out of the "shadows" of African American historiography is that they seem to reflect historic and contemporary beliefs held by "grassroots" African Americans. For example, my research on Chicago Metropolitan

included interviews with elderly black Chicagoans not associated with the company (to ascertain their general views concerning historic black business). These individuals, while they acknowledged black business' shortcomings, unanimously agreed that business enterprise was a positive aspect of African American community life.

Significantly, the views expressed by "grassroots" African Americans appear to be at variance with the black businessman as "villain" thesis. This is extremely important because it was these same people who, according to the critics of black business enterprise, were viciously exploited by black businessmen. This contradiction, obviously, needs to be explored further by scholars. Suffice it to say however, that it represents yet another reason why black business must come out of the shadows of African American historiography and take its place as an integral part of the post-Emancipation African American experience.

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