

Review Essay

The Economics of the Black Freedom Struggle

TOM ADAM DAVIES

Michael Ezra (ed.), *The Economic Civil Rights Movement: African Americans and the Struggle for Economic Power* (Routledge: New York, 2013, £85.00). Pp. 220. ISBN 978 0 4155 3736 0.

Gordon K. Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black–Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960–1974* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013, \$33.75). Pp. 376. ISBN 978 0 8078 3851 8.

Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013, \$32.29). Pp. 352. ISBN 978 1 4696 0201 1.

- Mama Younger: Son, how come you talk so much 'bout money?
Walter Lee Younger: Because it is life, Mama!
Mama Younger: Oh. So now it's life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life – now it's money. I guess the world really do change.
Walter Lee Younger: No – it was always money, Mama. We just didn't know about it.

Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: Random House, 1958), 74

The disproportionate impact of the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis and subsequent economic recession on black families in the United States has helped to revive a long-standing debate about the relationship between race, inequality and the political and economic structures of American capitalist society. The seemingly unmistakable, and increasing, correlation between race and poverty in America has led many to challenge the powerful and pervasive idea – central to the colour-blind conservatism espoused by many on the American right – that the nation's problem of racial discrimination was overcome with the passage of civil and voting rights legislation in the mid-1960s. As part of this process, historians have begun increasingly to reconsider the place of economic questions, principles and aspirations in African American and

Department of History and Centre for American Studies, University of Sussex. Email: [T.A. Davies@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:T.A.Davies@sussex.ac.uk).

other minority groups' struggles against racial inequality. Although these three books are very different in form, content, and scope, they each reflect the growing importance of this line of inquiry within the historiography.

Explicitly endorsing the "long civil rights movement" framework that has emerged from scholarship of the last decade, *The Economic Civil Rights Movement* is an edited collection that seeks to highlight the ways in which economic objectives and considerations motivated the black freedom struggle across much of the twentieth century. It does this by focussing upon episodes comprising a range of different forms of black protest and activism, including sit-ins, boycotts, selective buying campaigns, labour organizing, and community-oriented commercial ventures. In the process, a number of the thirteen essays in this slim volume cover new terrain. The rest are concerned with reconsidering the activism of more familiar figures and organizations in respect of its economic dimensions (and often its gender and class politics, too). Among these are essays on Asa Philip Randolph, Mary MacLeod Bethune and Martin Luther King Jr., and on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Local history is an especially strong theme and focus within the collection as a whole. One good example of this is Derek Charles Catsam's contribution, which explores the development of nonviolent black protest and direct action at Howard University, Washington, DC (and in the city more broadly) through the 1930s and 1940s. Catsam identifies the nation's capital as an underappreciated site of black activism during this period, and one in which important precursors to the civil rights revolution that crested in the early to mid-1960s can be found. Similarly, J. Michael Butler's essay on the highly effective sit-in and boycott movement in Pensacola, Florida in the early 1960s illuminates the struggle against Jim Crow in a part of the South that ordinarily rests on the fringes of the region's normative civil rights history.

Another strength of this collection is that, for all the light provided by success in places such as Pensacola, there is plenty of shade too. Across the volume, stories of failure – which are just as instructive and important to our understanding of the black freedom struggle as stories of success – are given an equal platform. A good example of this is Justin T. Lorts's essay on the national NAACP's attempts in the early 1950s to convince black Americans to boycott *The Andy and Amos Show*. While the NAACP declaimed the negative stereotyping of African Americans through the television show's two lead characters (both of whom were black), their efforts to convince African Americans to stop watching the programme and buying its sponsors' products were ultimately unsuccessful. In addition to the opposition they encountered from black actors, the NAACP also found that their objections to the show – which were underpinned by a concern for black middle-class respectability – were not shared by the majority of the show's predominantly working-class African American audience. Lorts's essay not only reveals the complex class dynamics of black activism and culture during the 1950s, but also broadens our picture of the national NAACP's work during a period in which it is most commonly associated with fighting Jim Crow through the nation's courts.

Other essays take us away from more traditional forms of black civil rights activism, such as direct-action protest and consumer boycotts, and toward the kind of black power-inflected economic activity and organization which became increasingly prominent during the mid- to late 1960s and beyond. For example, collection editor

Michael Ezra provides a fascinating account of the challenges faced by world champion African American heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali and his allies, during the mid- to late 1960s, in their efforts to stake out a space for black agency and economic empowerment within the white-controlled world of sports broadcasting. Stephanie Dyer's excellent article on the travails of Progress Plaza, a black-owned shopping centre in North Philadelphia, from its establishment in the mid- to late 1960s up to the present day, is one of several essays that deal with the important themes of black capitalism and community economic development, both of which came strongly to the fore during the black power era. Exploring the challenges faced by those seeking to build black economic power through the development and protection of black business, Dyer's compelling analysis reveals the often counterproductive longer-term consequences of African Americans' efforts to fuse the principles of capitalist development with racial identity politics and the broader goal of community empowerment.

If there is something negative to be said about this volume, however, it is that it is too short (an introduction and thirteen essays are squeezed into around two hundred pages). Across the collection there are numerous points and episodes that deserve greater attention, but which are not afforded the necessary space for further development. An especially good example of this comes in Kieran W. Taylor's essay on militant black labour organizing during the 1960s and 1970s, which includes a fascinating – and all too brief – section concerning the female-led workplace activism of hospital workers in Charleston, South Carolina during the mid- to late 1960s (155–58). Of considerable potential significance, this section alone merits being the subject of a much longer essay. (It is to be hoped that Taylor is developing it for publication in a more substantial form elsewhere.)

Overall, though, this collection does a fine job of highlighting the centrality of economic considerations to the black freedom struggle as it unfolded in communities across the country, from the New Deal up to the present day. By focussing on the ways in which African Americans sought either to build greater economic power, or to use that which they already had to try and force social change, this volume does much to suggest that, in the words of one contributor, “more than the desire to end poverty, black families yearned to be consumers in an affluent society. They did not contest capitalism, only their exclusion from it” (131). Underlining this important, yet often unspoken, dimension to the African American push for equality is one of the most valuable contributions that this volume, as a whole, makes.

Gordon K. Mantler's *Power to the Poor* illuminates another key aspect of the African American challenge to economic and racial inequality: community organizing efforts within the broad grassroots antipoverty movement that flourished during the mid- to late 1960s through the mid-1970s. Energized by the Johnson administration's War on Poverty, this movement comprised poor and working-class people of all races, from across the nation. Although the book is primarily focussed upon the relationship between the nation's two largest minority groups – African Americans and Mexican Americans – the place of Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and poor whites within antipoverty coalition politics is also examined (albeit it in less depth). In doing so, Mantler's deeply researched work enriches a historiography in which grassroots antipoverty groups in minority communities have tended to be studied both in isolation and in terms of their relation to mainstream white society, but not in relation to each other.

It is the complex interracial and intra-racial dynamics of coalition building among the various different racial groups within the antipoverty movement that serve as the central focus of this impressive new study, and Mantler has a great deal to say about the nature, and broader significance, of the coalition-building experience. *Power to the Poor* makes clear the tremendous obstacles faced by those seeking to build and sustain cross-racial coalitions. For example, not all groups understood concepts such as justice in the same way. Each group's own intra-racial politics, and distinct historical experiences of racial discrimination and economic exploitation in America, meant each differed in how they "understood their own poverty and the solutions to overcoming it" (108). Cooperation under these circumstances, then, was an impressive and significant achievement in and of itself. The development of antipoverty coalition politics is mapped in cities across America, though primarily in places such as Denver, Albuquerque, Washington, DC and Chicago. By focussing on these locations, Mantler moves us beyond the better-known sites of grassroots antipoverty activism and brings to light histories of community organizing and protest that have, until now, been largely untold.

At the heart of the book is a detailed study of one of the most remarkable and important examples and feats of multiracial activism and interracial organizing in American history: the SCLC-led Poor Peoples Campaign (PPC) of May–June 1968. Initially conceived by Martin Luther King Jr., the PPC was a large-scale, non-violent antipoverty protest intended to pressure the federal government into adopting a more interventionist approach to tackling deepening economic inequality in the United States. Demanding "jobs and income" for the nation's poor and unemployed, the PPC reflected the broader antipoverty movement's call for the radical redistribution of political and economic power, from the top to the bottom. Featuring massive, coordinated antipoverty protests in cities nationwide, the PPC most famously took thousands of antipoverty activists to the nation's capital, where, for over six weeks, many lived on the Washington Mall in a temporary encampment known as "Resurrection City." Through his in-depth exploration of the PPC – one of the book's many highlights – Mantler has done more than perhaps anyone else to elucidate the campaign's complex racial politics, and the transformative and lasting effect it had on participants and on particular groups (especially the Chicano movement).

The PPC is also an important part of Mantler's broader analysis of the longer-term implications of interracial coalition building within the multiracial antipoverty movement, especially as it related to the era's "racial power movements" (for example, the black power and brown power movements). As part of his overarching thesis, Mantler challenges the conventional view that the growth of racial identity politics among African Americans, Mexican Americans and other minority groups during the mid- to late 1960s actively hindered efforts to build multiracial antipoverty coalitions. Instead, he contends, the "relationship between race-based identity politics and class-based coalitions ... was not antithetical, but mutually reinforcing" (4). Indeed, a fundamental premise of this book is that "distinct identities were – and still are – inherent to the concept of coalition, antipoverty or otherwise" (245). Furthermore, the book concludes by linking the experience and development of multiracial coalition building among movements based on racial identity to the later formation of the multiracial electoral coalitions – so-called "rainbow coalitions" – that helped bring increasing numbers of minority candidates to office, in cities across the nation, during the late 1970s and the 1980s. *Power to the Poor*, then, has a great deal to tell us, not

only about the science and practice of interracial coalition building, and about the work of a diverse and truly multiracial grassroots antipoverty movement, but also about their relation to the future trajectory of minority politics in America. As such, it is essential reading for those interested in the War on Poverty; the era's racial-identity politics; and the broader, multiracial struggle for racial equality and social and economic justice in the postwar United States.

Moving away from the urban centres where the antipoverty movement flourished, distinguished historian Pete Daniel addresses the struggle of African American farmers trying to make a better life for themselves, and the machinations of recalcitrant government officials determined to stop them. In the decades following emancipation, farming swiftly became a primary occupation for African Americans, and by 1920 there were 925,000 black farms across the country, the vast majority of which were in the South. By the start of the 1980s, however, that number had fallen to 18,000. While the number of white-owned farms also fell dramatically during this period, black farmers suffered disproportionately. The consensus among scholars of this phenomenon has been that it was both the result of a voluntary black exodus from the land, and an unfortunate by-product of the technological and scientific revolution that transformed agriculture through the mid-twentieth century: a government-led, supposedly colour-blind, revolution aimed at developing large-scale, capital-intensive, "big-business" farming at the expense of smaller-scale, labour-intensive operations (which black farms tended invariably to be). Primarily covering the four decades between the start of the New Deal and the mid-1970s – a period in which nearly 600,000 African American farmers went out of business – Daniel challenges this dominant analysis by exposing a history of deeply ingrained institutional racism within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), its subagencies, and their official counterparts and affiliates at the state and local levels (a broad network he refers to as "agrigovernment").

Acting in league with wealthy, white-owned, large-scale "agribusiness" – whose interests agrigovernment officials deliberately privileged – Daniel meticulously maps their concerted and sustained efforts to deny African American farmers (as well as other minority and female farmers) access to the benefits of agricultural policy. As much as technological advancement certainly played an important part in the decline of the black farm, this prolonged, highly coordinated, and hitherto overlooked institutional racial discrimination, Daniel argues, was a vital ingredient in the process. There were numerous ways in which American agrigovernment worked to limit black opportunity. In an agricultural world reshaped by mechanization and scientific change, access to government programmes and credit became essential to survival. The problem, Daniel explains, was that "white hands disbursed the millions of dollars that poured through all-white county agricultural committees in the South, and these committees decided who received loans, the size of acreage allotments, and which farming methods to promote" (28). In such an environment, white officials found it very easy to boost white, big-business farming interests and to keep African Americans on the margins of agricultural assistance, or to shut them out altogether. Although some local bureaucracies had democratic elements (such as elected committees), black participation in local agrigovernment elections was minimized by the systematic use of misinformation, coercion, and intimidation by white officials and their allies. By denying African Americans any meaningful role in the decision-making process, white bureaucrats had a free hand in using agricultural policy as a means to

both protect and advance white supremacy, and to push hundreds of thousands of black farmers up to, and beyond, the point of insolvency.

Somewhat perversely, this discrimination intensified through the 1960s, at the very moment that African Americans in general appeared to be making significant progress. In exploring how it was that “black farmers suffered the most debilitating discrimination during the civil rights era, when laws supposedly protected them from bias” (5), Daniel reveals the ways in which USDA officials disingenuously embraced the language of equal rights, as they simultaneously embedded discrimination further into their programmes. Civil rights activists, however, recognized that racial discrimination remained entrenched in agricultural policy, even as Washington officials either tacitly condoned that discrimination or blithely accepted local and state agencies’ hollow assurances that they were committed to the goal of racial equality. While civil rights organizing in the Deep South during the mid-1960s is most commonly associated with voter registration and political education work, and with challenging Jim Crow segregation, Daniel has uncovered an understudied strand of the black freedom struggle in the region. Alongside their better-known efforts, Daniel shows how numerous organizations (including SNCC, CORE and the NAACP) helped southern black farmers fight the discrimination that threatened their livelihoods, increased awareness of various USDA programmes and benefits for which black farmers were eligible, and helped get African American representatives elected to some local agricultural committees. By highlighting the efforts of mainstream civil rights groups to help black farmers challenge the discrimination and disadvantage they faced, Daniel adds greater depth to our understanding of the civil rights movement and its activism south of the Mason–Dixon line.

By bringing together the byzantine world of agrigovernment and the experiences of black farmers in the South (in particular through a detailed case study of Willie Strain, of North Carolina), Daniel succeeds in illuminating what has largely been a hidden history in which “thousands of USDA bureaucrats who denied African American farmers loans, jobs, acreage, information, and courtesy” went unpunished, and their actions overlooked for decades (263–64). In doing so, he forces us to think again about the nature of the liberal New Deal order and the role it played in both creating and sustaining racial and economic inequality in the nation at large, and in advancing the interests of big business. As such, *Dispossession* is a welcome addition to the historiography of the civil rights movement, and should also be of great interest to students of twentieth-century postwar political and social history in the US.

Taken together, these three books foreground the ways in which economic concerns and objectives motivated and guided black activism and protest. They also tell us a great deal about the differing ways that blacks viewed the economic values and ideals of mainstream American society, and of African Americans’ complex and evolving relation to capitalism. Finally, in the process they highlight the formidable obstacles to achieving prosperity that blacks in the United States have faced; obstacles that many African Americans and other minority groups continue to face today.