

Book Reviews

Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice

By Jessica Gordon Nembhard

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The United Nations declared 2012 the *Year of Cooperatives* because of the mighty contributions that cooperative enterprises have realised in terms of economic development and inclusive business models for marginalised groups. With *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*, Jessica Gordon Nembhard, an African American scholar, with deep roots in community economic development, has contributed a revisionist account of the social economy in the lives of Black people from the 1700s to 2007.

Gordon Nembhard's work on cooperatives in the United States is situated within the global movement of cooperatives. She uses the International Cooperative Alliance (2012) definition of cooperatives as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise" (p 2). From this, she argues that the Black experience in cooperatives in the Americas is rich and vibrant and is one of activism and is rooted in a cultural struggle for human rights.

Even so, the social economy literature, by and large, has tended to be written in a generic way to theorise about economics, class and exclusion. It is important, then, to focus on the social economy and its development on specific racialised groups and this is one of the first social economy books to examine cooperative economic and thoughts from a Black perspective. In doing this, this book refutes a European starting point for cooperative development by showing that Black people in the Americas were active in cooperative businesses and organisations since slave times of the 1700s if not earlier. Indeed, in the Caribbean, the Bossales (African-born slaves) in Santo Domingue (called Haiti today) were engaging in Sol (collective informal banks) as far back as the 1600s (Heinl and Heinl 2005). Rather than Black people's idea of mutual aid and collective activities being introduced by foreigners they were instead indigenous projects and to hold that collective organizing was occurring outside of the dominant white power structure is a profound finding.

Gordon Nembhard's book has been ten-years in the making as existing literature was often not available or easily located. She refers to as the 'hidden' past of Black cooperatives in the Americas as stories of Black cooperatives are missing from history books, and this may explain why people are not aware of the rich tradition of collectivity among persons of African descent.. The trained economist had to become a historian of sorts to dig for deeply buried information and to track down obscure periodicals such as *Negro World*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, or *Crisis* to log the countless one-liners dealing with cooperatives in diaries and letters. Some of the most minute details are found in her endnotes. In what seems painstaking archival work and many

hours of listening to oral histories, Gordon Nembhard manages to bring to life material about cooperatives among African Americans starting and the time-line at the back of the book helps to orient the various cooperatives events in American history from a Black perspective.

Gordon Nembhard's work is a testimony of personal dedication and persistence. She managed to uncover many stories about cooperatives formed and led by African-American men and women. The book outlines two key questions: (1) Have Black folk ever practised cooperative economics? and (2) Why would resources be allocated for this? In asking these two questions, Gordon Nembhard re-writes economic history to show that Black people have been major actors in cooperative development and thinking. Her work also acknowledges the role of marginalized Black Americans, especially women, in the cooperative movement (e.g. Ladies Auxiliaries, Freedom Quilting Bee). Though the American cooperative story has been suppressed, this book documents the pragmatic organizing of racialized people for the betterment of their communities.

To tell the story of Black cooperators, the book is organized into three main parts, with each section made of three chapters feeding into the one before: (1) Early African American Cooperative Roots; (2) Deliberate Cooperative Economic Development and (3) Twentieth-century practices, twenty-first century solutions. Gordon Nembhard anchors her case studies of examples of Black people engaging in cooperative economics in Black cooperative economic thought. For example, WEB Du Bois' concept of group economics urging African Americans to come together to create solidarity businesses to help one another. Despite the feud between Du Bois and Jamaican-born Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Gordon Nembhard shows that both men were aligned on collective businesses for people of colour.¹ Garvey's push for Pan-African economic cooperation is a theory that is deeply followed by Black communities such as the Nation of Islam and Rastafarians. Rastafarians in the Caribbean regard Garvey as a prophet because of his ideas on Black-owned collective enterprises and self-reliance through business (K'adamwe, Bernard and Dixon, 2011). It should be noted that a young Garvey was most likely influenced by community-driven Partner banks (collective banks) in St. Ann's, Jamaica because this was a mainstay activity taking place under the colonisation.

The book's title, *Collective Courage* captures that real-life danger to Black people organizing. One of the most poignant reminders in this book, is that the Underground Railroad between America and into Canada was a collective effort and sharing of resources. People took massive risks to move Black people from bondage to freedom. For African-Americans under slavery, during the Jim Crow era and into modern times, organising groups and associations is risky business. Black managed groups, informal or formal, were (still are) viewed as subversive. Gordon Nembhard also shows the serious risks and life-threats to Blacks when they belonged to cooperative enterprises. Examples include the campaign directed against cooperatives in the southern states. The Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Co-operative Union (CFNACU) was the largest-ever organization of Black Americans with 250,000 members with a mission to provide self-help to Black farmers in Mississippi was an object of harassment and defamation. Even worse was the massacre in Leflore, Mississippi of possibly hundreds of African-Americans by local illegal militias (pp 56-8). The Federation of Southern Cooperatives started in 1967 to assist poor farmers was an apex organization of many Black cooperatives who were not able to sustain themselves in the long-term because of political interference. In spite of the FBI harassment of its member organizations and its own organization, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives has persevered. Many of the cooperatives and member-owned institutions discussed in this book have not survived because of the overt racism, violence and harassment directed against Black economic projects. Black people coming together for a social good was viewed as a dangerous activity. Gordon Nembhard reminds us that Black leaders had to go

underground because of the fact that they could be lynched for these activities. She argues that Black cooperative practice throughout America experienced an intense form of “violence, sabotage, the hostility of competitors, and structural class and racial discrimination often made it difficult to survive and eventually defeated these cooperative efforts”(p 83).

For far too long the study of the social economy in the Americas has been sedate. Perhaps, it has been calm because the struggle of economic cooperation for persons of African descent is largely missing and this book fills that gap. This work expands the academic theories used within the social economy to include Black political thinkers such as WEB Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and Marcus Mosiah Garvey. The author documents the practice of cooperative economics among Black people in the Americas and shows how marginalized Black people figured out how to work around unjust systems to help one another. The Black cooperative legacy is thought-provoking as it points to the cruel economics of racism and the denial of access to goods and services to Black persons. The free market mantra of a trickle-down theory in America is a myth as persons of African heritage have been systematically excluded from economic and social opportunities. Yet, when Black people do aim for self-reliance they are confronted by covert/overt acts to diminish their economic activities.

The African diaspora has made serious contributions to the concept of alternative development. Its African ancestry's past of collective organizing is what sustained slaves and colonized people in the Americas. Gordon Nembhard's *Collective Courage* is an inspiring account of Black people's resilience to create cooperative enterprises. It is also an emotional story of pain and suffering of the Black diaspora under class and race-based oppression. African-Americans as a racialized group had to rely on boot-strap development to survive in a hostile environment where laws were against its Black citizenry. The cooperative experience of African-Americans is one that can resonate with persons of African descent elsewhere because of the struggle to of a marginalised people to cope under hostile economic and political environments.

As a Black Canadian women teaching about the social economy, I find that the academic literature does a poor job at including positive contributions of the African diaspora. One exception would be the edited collection about rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) by Ardener and Burman (1995) where the authors examine the various ways in which marginalized people of colour, particularly women, organize collective banks to build support groups both in the global South and developed world. Works highlighting African people's activity in cooperatives is lacking. The material most often points to ways (usually white) foreigners introduced cooperatives to people in colonized lands, thus leaving a troubled cooperative history (Develterre 1993). Gordon Nembhard's work fills the void and focuses on the Black experience in cooperatives and the social economy.

Gordon Nembhard makes a significant contribution to the social economy literature. She injects a new voice into what the social economy means for people of colour. This book is a comprehensive review of the African diaspora's use of collective institutions in the United States. The analysis of the social economy is eye-opening in the way it situates the Black experience on its own terms as pioneers of collective economics. For teachers of social and economic justice, this book should be a core text as it shows students that collective organizing can be political for marginalized groups of colour. Ideas of community and pooling resources is a firmly rooted African tradition, and this legacy of collectivity has stayed with its diaspora in the Americas in a powerful and meaningful way.

The Reviewer

Caroline Shenaz Hossein is Assistant Professor of Business and Society, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada. An adapted version of this piece appeared in *Black Canadian Studies*, October 2014

Note

¹ Jamaican scholar Rupert Lewis at the University of West Indies at Mona, Jamaica may be one of the best authorities on the subject.

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