Black Power, Inc.: Global American Business and the Post-Apartheid City

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A new phrase entered the English lexicon in the late 1960s amid growing calls for "community control" and reparations for slavery. In 1969 the United Methodist Board of Missions announced a $1.3 million grant supporting what they termed "black empowerment."[1] The board's announcement followed closely on the heels of the Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC)'s publication of the "Black Manifesto." Drafted by Black Panther activist James Forman, the Black Manifesto demanded, among other things, that white churches and synagogues pay $500 million in reparations for the slave trade. These reparations would be used by the BEDC to support several projects, including Black publishing houses, a national Black audio-visual network, and a southern land bank to assist those evicted "from their homes because they have dared to defy the white racism of this country."[2] Side-stepping the question of reparations, the Methodists responded six months later by announcing their program for Black empowerment, which included donations to several Black, Mexican-American, and Indian-American religious and civil rights organizations, along with $550,000 to Black colleges.[3]

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1. "Methodist Grant Disappointing," *Bay State Banner,* October 30, 1969, 14.
2. Black Economic Development Conference, "Black Manifesto," April 26, 1969, https://www.episcopalarchives.org/Afro-Anglican_history/exhibit/pdf/blackmanifesto.pdf.
3. "Methodist Grant Disappointing," *Bay State Banner,* October 30, 1969, 14.

At the time, few paid attention to what was, in effect, an appropriation of Black Power. Over the next three decades, Black empowerment became an increasingly popular way for religious leaders, businesspeople, politicians, philanthropists, and government bureaucrats to describe the proliferation of public and private initiatives promoting vocational training, Black entrepreneurship, and other kinds of "productive" activity in urban areas across the United States. In time, Black empowerment also appeared in other Black communities outside the United States, most notably in South Africa, where American corporate executives deployed Black empowerment with particular success in the context of the international struggle against apartheid.

Black empowerment represented more than a discourse; it was also a politics. The late 1960s and 1970s were, as scholars have shown, a watershed moment for Black activism. Building on the postwar movements for civil rights and independence, Black activists challenged the structures of white supremacy and racial capitalism. In 1966, while protesting racism in Mississippi, the chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Stokely Carmichael, gave a speech calling for "Black Power," giving rise to a popular slogan repeated by activists across the globe, including as far away as Palestine and India.[4] With deep roots in the history of Black radicalism and Black militancy, the global Black Power movement confronted white supremacy in all of its varied manifestations, from all-white unions that refused to admit Black workers; from government agencies that simultaneously provided welfare to working class and poor whites, while denying those same benefits to tax-paying Black citizens; and from different geographies—the urban ghetto to the multinational corporation.[5] In this context, Black entrepreneurs, corporate executives, government

4. Angelo, *Black Power*; Slate, *Black Power beyond Borders*.

5. Five decades after the initial coining of the term, Black Power remains a topic of intense scholarly interest, animating debates on the origins, parameters, and meanings of the term. On the origins of Black Power, see Jackson, "The Meaning of 'Black Power"; Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*. For a sense of the range of meanings and scope of the Black Power movement, see Slate, *Black Power beyond Borders*; Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*; Murch, *Living for the City*; Countryman, *Up South*; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*; Singh, *Black Is a Country*; Self, *American Babylon*; Williams, *Politics of Public Housing*; Woodward, *A Nation within a Nation*; Tyson, *Radio Free*; Cone, *Black Theology and Black*. Devin Fergus comes closest to my understanding of the Black Power movement through revealing its engagement with and ultimate taming under liberalism, in Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics*. Yet, Fergus's focus is on Black Power's engagement with Politics (with a capital *P*), including the legal system and electoral politics. "Black Power, Inc.," by contrast, examines how corporate executives, government officials, Black entrepreneurs, and other civic leaders fused aspects of Black Power politics and free market politics to preserve and expand global American capitalism.

officials, and other civic leaders joined together in forging a politics of Black empowerment that mirrored a selection of demands stemming from the global Black Power movement, while endeavoring to preserve those institutions central to the perpetuation of American capitalism.

"Black Power, Inc.: Global American Business and the Post-Apartheid City" charts the transnational rise of Black empowerment politics over the course of four decades—from the 1960s through the 1990s—and across space—from the streets of urban America to the corporate board room. Building on and complicating histories of Black protest and American capitalism, I argue that U.S.-multinational corporations significantly influenced postwar Black internationalism, and vice versa, that Black politics shaped corporate politics at local, national, and international scales. "Black Power, Inc." draws on a range of government, corporate, and movement archives to reveal the financial, intellectual, and political investments made by multinational corporate executives, Black entrepreneurs, and government officials in Black empowerment.[6] By centering private capital alongside state power, "Black Power, Inc." explains how American business profited from Black militancy, racial liberalism, and the seeds of political conservatism that blossomed within the global Black freedom struggle.

As suggested by the term itself, Black empowerment shared much in common with its patronym: Black Power. Among those who helped to give credence to Black Power and espouse its transnational dimensions were Malcolm X and Robert F. Williams. Drawing parallels between Jim Crow and European colonialism, as well as U.S. military intervention abroad, Malcolm and Williams took aim at American imperialism and capitalism with their radical articulation of Black Power. Hitherto, historians have portrayed these kinds of anti-imperial and anticapitalist views as emblematic of Black Power while overlooking another dimension of the movement; namely, those who were adapting elements of Black Power to fit more comfortably alongside U.S. political and commercial interests. Rather than reinforcing calls for reparations for slavery or sanctions against South Africa—two of the demands made by Black radicals—proponents of Black empowerment

6. "Black Power, Inc." draws on research conducted in over a dozen libraries and archives across the United States and South Africa, as well as numerous online databases and collections. Archives of particular centrality include the Special Collections Library at Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia; the Hagley Library in Wilmington, Delaware; the Special Collections Library at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey; the Historical Papers at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa; the National Library of South Africa in Cape Town, South Africa; and the Archives Department at the University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa.

encouraged Black people to seek power through managerial training programs, Black entrepreneurship, and other kinds of commercial ventures compatible with an existing global capitalist order.

Responding to inquisitive journalists eager to know his views on the controversial phrase gaining traction across Black America, Reverend Leon H. Sullivan captured the connection he and other civil rights leaders turned entrepreneurs saw between Black Power and Black empowerment: "I am black power—six feet, five inches of black power. I believe in the ability of the black man to do what any other man can do. But I also believe that black power and white power must put their strength together to build American power."[7] Sullivan's career offers a useful frame through which to trace the development and spread of Black empowerment. Chapter 1 of "Black Power, Inc." begins by following Sullivan's initial forays into activism, including his involvement in the 1941 March on Washington Movement. Following a brief stint in Harlem, New York, where he benefited from the tutelage of people like Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and A. Philip Randolph, Sullivan accepted a position as head pastor of the Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia, from where he launched his subsequent ventures. Those ventures included leading the Selective Patronage Movement targeting local business that refused to employ Black Philadelphians in skilled positions. Taking advantage of renewed calls for militancy inspired by the sit-in movement and relying on the institutional power of the Black church, by 1963, the Selective Patronage Movement claimed to have opened up over two-thousand new skilled jobs for Black Philadelphians.[8] For Sullivan, these jobs were only the beginning. Declaring "integration without preparation [was] frustration," Sullivan joined other Black ministers in gradually moving away from direct action protests and toward promoting ventures oriented toward economic production and Black entrepreneurship.[9] Profits, not protests, they claimed, were the real measure of Black Power.

Building on work by Tiffany Gill, Marcia Chatelain, and others on the commercial dimensions of the Black freedom struggle, "Black Power, Inc." analyzes Black empowerment's ascension in conversation with and in response to the radical demands made by Black activists

7. Sullivan quoted in Audrey Weaver, "The Self-Help Story: Chicagoans See Progress in OIC's" *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 22, 1970, 12; Other members of this group include people like Harold Simms, who left his position as head of the National Urban League to become an executive at Johnson & Johnson; and Reverend Andrew Young, who championed Black entrepreneurship as the next "economic phase" of the civil rights movement.

8. McKee, *Problem of Jobs*, 121; Countryman, *Up South,* 101–110, 117–119.

9. Sullivan, *Build Brother Build*, 86.

across the United States and the African diaspora more broadly.[10] In doing so, it makes clear the contributions made by the global Black Power movement to the development of the multinational corporation, and vice versa, in ways too often elided by the separation of Black Studies and Business History. Drawing on the unique insights made available in the private collections of Black business people, including confidential correspondence, board meeting minutes, and financial records, the dissertation reveals the crucial role played by Black entrepreneurs like Sullivan as mediators, negotiating the terms of Black Power with white corporate executives and other business professionals. The dissertation explains how and why the same business leaders, who initially reviled Sullivan for his role leading the Selective Patronage Movement, later became supporters of Sullivan's next venture, Opportunities Industrialization Centers, Inc., a job-training and economic development program launched amid widespread urban rebellions. Concerned by the revolutionary calls of the Black Power movement, U.S. corporations increasingly championed Black empowerment as a central tool for managing social unrest and reimagining corporate America as facilitators, rather than obstacles, to Black advancement.

Far from a static set of ideas and institutions, Black empowerment proved highly adaptable, modified by proponents to fit the particularities of the moment and place. Chapter 2 follows Sullivan and others in their efforts to spread the gospel of Black empowerment to their African "brothers and sisters."[11] Black American-led empowerment programs in Africa took many forms, ranging from small-scale rural development projects to industrial education programs like the one in Kenya, which partnered with General Motors to train Africans to work in the company's new auto-manufacturing plant in Nairobi. Here, Sullivan situated himself as the heir to a decades-old Pan-Africanist politics, stating, "Not since the days of Marcus Garvey, one of the great patrons of Africanism, not since the great efforts of W. E. B. Du Bois, has a sensibility been pointed to Africa from [the United States]." Henceforth, "a bridge is being built between African and the Afro-American that will bring to pass a new era of communication and cooperation between the two continents."[12]

10. Chatelain, "Miracle of the Golden Arches; Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*. See also Davis, *From Head Shops to Whole Foods*; Mills, *Cutting Along the Color Line*; Hill and Rabig, *Business of Black Power*; Green, *Selling the Race*; Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*.

11. Sullivan quoted in Ibok Esema, "Rev. Leon Sullivan's OIC Mission Gets Warm Welcome in Nigeria," *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 11, 1970, 13.

12. Sullivan quoted in "Rev. Sullivan urges Nixon to back OIC," *Bay State Banner,* July 30, 1970, 3.

By examining the transnational spread of Black empowerment alongside American business expansion in Africa, "Black Power, Inc." likewise contributes to a growing body of scholarship on American corporate imperialism.[13] Recent scholarship has examined the international expansion of postwar American business in search of new markets, as well as human and material resources.[14] In this regard, however, U.S. business interest in Africa has remained largely in the historiographical shadows.[15] Capitalizing on postwar trade liberalization brought about by the end of European colonialism in Africa, the U.S. Department of Commerce led the charge for American corporate imperialism, declaring the continent the next frontier for American business expansion. Announcing the first of a series of trade missions led by the department, its representatives proclaimed in May 1960, "United States exports have greater prospects for expansion than at any time in the past."[16] Far from universally welcomed, American corporations encountered significant criticism from Black nationalists and socialists within and outside Africa, many of whom decried U.S. commercial expansion on the continent as a form of neocolonialism. One of the most prominent critiques came from Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, whose 1965 *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism* called out European and American capital on the continent as a new form of colonialism.[17] Nkrumah's writing went on to have a major impact on the Pan-Africanist movement, including the Non-Aligned Movement.

Over time, criticism of American corporations grew particularly acute in regard to U.S. business dealings in apartheid South Africa. Building on and complicating scholarship on the international anti-apartheid movement, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 take up the question of American business response to growing calls for sanctions and divestment in and beyond the corporate boardroom.[18] Rather than a simple story of resistance, "Black Power, Inc." shows how corporate executives

13. While drawing on the analytical contributions of previous scholars of corporate imperialism like Norman Girvan, *Corporate Imperialism*; Prahalad and Lieberthal, *End of Corporate Imperialism*, my use of the term American corporate imperialism more aptly fits with a small, yet growing, body of scholarship on the mechanisms of U.S. corporate expansion and control in the post-war era. See Van Vleck, *Empire of Air*; Enstad, *Cigarettes, Inc.*; Beasley, "Service Learning."

14. See, for example, de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*; Wagleitner, *Coca-Colonization of the Cold War*; Cowie, *Capital Moves*.

15. Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*.

16. Brendan M. Jones, "2 Trade Missions Emphasize Africa: Exceptional Opportunities are Detailed for Eastern and Western Areas," *New York Times*, May 29, 1960, F1.

17. Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism*.

18. Morgan, "Into the Struggle"; Hostetter, *Movement Matters*; Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*; Culverson, *Contesting Apartheid*; Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*.

in collaboration with Black American and Black South African businesspeople employed Black empowerment as a way to rebrand U.S. corporations as allies in the fight against apartheid. Central to this process was the creation of the Sullivan Principles, a code of conduct for corporations operating in South Africa that promoted desegregation, corporate social responsibility, and Black empowerment. Drafted by Sullivan in conjunction with eighteen executives representing fifteen companies, including International Harvester Company, Citicorp, and Mobil Oil, the Sullivan Principles garnered widespread attention from government officials, media, and activists. Roy Wilkins, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Council, for example, praised the Sullivan Principles as an important step "foreshadow[ing] . . . an end to segregation in South African life."[19] Following some initial resistance to the idea of the Sullivan Principles, dozens of corporations joined the program following the Soweto Uprising, which provoked international condemnation and inspired renewed calls for sanctions and divestment. By the early-1980s, over one hundred and fifty American companies had signed the Sullivan Principles, making it one of the largest international corporate initiatives in modern history.

Examining the origins of both the Sullivan Principles and other American business-led initiatives promoting Black empowerment in South Africa contributes to a new understanding of the role played by corporations as agents of American diplomacy. This kind of private diplomacy was crucial in the context of the Cold War. With Washington constrained in its ability to intervene on the issue of apartheid, U.S. corporate executives, with the help of Black American businesspeople, took the initiative to forge relationships with prominent Black South Africans, including, ultimately, a number of key figures in the African National Congress. In doing so, these American corporations used their support for Black empowerment programs to sell themselves—literally and figuratively—as partners in constructing a new postapartheid/postcolonial world.

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