



Urban locations and Black Metropolis resilience in the Great Depression



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ABSTRACT

Motivated by theoretical arguments about ethnicity and economics and by historical research on urban black communities in the United States, this paper investigates the resilience of the early twentieth-century Black Metropolis. The study tests hypotheses about changes during the Great Depression (1930–1940) in the advantages of various cities as locations of black communities' ethnic economies, analyzing Census data on blacks' representation in occupations reflecting the Black Metropolis's professional, entrepreneurial, and cultural media pursuits. There is mixed support for the hypothesis that the nationally dominant urban centers of New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia had the most resilient Black Metropolises, a finding that casts doubt on claims that black communities in such key places enjoyed exceptionally favorable locational advantages. Yet, the results support the hypothesis that northern cities were, overall, more resilient locations than southern cities, particularly for black professionals and entrepreneurs, affirming the argument that the urban North's Black Metropolises were vital economic opportunity centers for these black communities' upper- and middle-classes.

1. Introduction

The term *ethnic economy* refers to the collective business activities of an ethnic minority group.¹ The latter is a group whose members have a common and visible identity, based on their shared ancestry, history and culture, and who, because of their power- and resource-disadvantages vis-à-vis other groups, face prejudice and discrimination from the wider society of which they are a part (Light, 1983, p. 277). Such groups are often compelled to start their business enterprises – for instance, small-scale retail stores and service shops – within the confines of their own socially and spatially isolated communities, as their members are frequently excluded from societal institutions and prime commercial locations by an economically and politically dominant majority group. Ethnic economies have been created in the wake of national and international migrations of peoples to cities around the world. For example, such economies have been established by Koreans in New York, Pakistanis and Indians in London, Turks in Berlin, and Chinese in Toronto and Vancouver (Aldrich et al., 1989).

Ethnic economies, composed of ethnic-owned enterprises and their co-ethnic employees (Light and Gold, 2000), can be highly vulnerable to the adverse effects of business-cycle downturns. The enterprises of such economies typically operate under marginal circumstances – relying, for example, on impecunious co-ethnic consumers – and thus are failure-prone even in the best of times, owing to group members' restricted access to capital and jobs, among other disadvantages

stemming from majority-group prejudice and discrimination (Bates, 1997). But when the larger economy stagnates, ethnic economies face especially bleak prospects, particularly because minority-group members, relegated to the labor-market queue's bottom, are broadly excluded from mainstream employment by the heightened competition with majority workers and job-seekers that usually occurs during hard times (Boyd, 2000). Simply put, when the business cycle turns downward, ethnic minorities are the last to be hired and first to be fired, and as the consequences of joblessness – notably, financial destitution – are channeled into minority communities, ethnic-owned enterprises are at exceptionally high risk of collapse.

Yet, there are reasons for believing that the fortunes of ethnic economies vary substantially across an urban hierarchy. There are, in particular, grounds for suspecting that ethnic economies in major urban centers, and in the most dominant urban centers, especially, are better insulated from the effects of business-cycle downturns than are their counterparts in other locations. For one thing, ethnic economies in dominant urban centers may enjoy the positive externalities generated by such places' large populations and extensive administrative and commercial functions. For example, in these centers, ethnic enterprises may benefit from many well-documented amenities, including close proximity to sizable audiences and markets, exposure to cosmopolitanism and innovative ideas, relief from prejudice and intolerance, and access to economically stimulating social relationships (Hawley, 1972).

In addition, ethnic economies in dominant urban centers may profit

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¹ The term *ethnic group* or *ethnic minority group* is used instead of racial group or racial minority group due to the questionable validity of the concept of race, which emphasizes genetic hereditary background rather than socio-cultural heritage (e.g., Sussman, 2014).

from advantages created by large, co-ethnic populations, which frequently arise in these centers because of mass in-migration. Specifically, urbanization often leads to “critical masses” of minority groups in major cities – that is, ethnic populations that are sufficiently large to support ethnic community institutions that would otherwise be unviable (Fischer, 1995, p. 545). A critical mass of group members can produce “internal strengths” in an ethnic community that support the group’s economic activities in spite of majority opposition (Lieberson, 1980, p. 297). One of these strengths is a co-ethnic consumer market that ethnic enterprises can dependably serve, protected from outside competition by ethnic entrepreneurs’ unique insights into co-ethnics’ “special culturally based tastes” and/or by majority-group entrepreneurs’ aversion to doing business with minorities (Aldrich et al., 1985, p. 997). Other strengths include the mutual trust and in-group loyalty that are reinforced when a critical mass helps group members to develop a shared and affirmed identity and a vital ethnic subculture that instills group members with pride, energy, and inspiration (Fischer, 1984). Such strengths may bolster the ethnicity-based social networks that collectively mobilize the group’s resources and allow ethnic entrepreneurs to obtain not only reliable co-ethnic customers but also compliant co-ethnic employees, creating the potential for emergence of a self-sufficient ethnic enclave (Waldinger et al., 1990a; Wilson and Portes, 1980).

Yet there are also reasons for believing that, in the urban hierarchy’s dominant centers, ethnic enterprises are overexposed to the negative effects of business-cycle downturns, and thus it is possible that ethnic economies in such places will fare worse in an economic crisis than their counterparts in other locations. In mature industrial societies, for instance, the adverse consequences of recessions are often focused into the most dominant cities, and such cities, as key goods production and distribution centers, frequently sustain the greatest job losses and business failures when the manufacturing sector crashes. A notable case in point, discussed later, is the United States’ experience during the Great Depression. In economically distressed times, then, dominant urban centers can be inhospitable entrepreneurial environments for ethnic minorities.

Furthermore, according to classical theories of ethnic-group relations, large minority populations in dominant urban centers can become high-profile targets for majority-group discrimination, especially when labor-market competition accelerates in the aftermath of widespread joblessness. Large minority populations are generally viewed as economically and/or politically threatening by the majority (Blalock, 1967). Hence, when jobs become scarce, the majority’s efforts to exclude perceived minority competitors from workplaces and employment opportunities are usually intensified, often leading to unprecedented anti-minority hostility and segregation during business-cycle downturns (Bonacich, 1976). A minority group’s economic or political response to stepped-up oppression can, moreover, be hindered if a sizable co-ethnic population impedes the group’s collective action mobilization (Blalock, 1967). Group members’ large numbers may, for example, swamp the ethnic community’s voluntary institutions, restricting the group’s organization of voting blocs or pressure groups. It follows that, in the urban hierarchy’s dominant centers, large minority populations can suffer disadvantages that severely undermine ethnic economies.

In sum, theory and research suggest competing propositions about the fortunes of ethnic economies in dominant urban centers during times of economic distress: (1) ethnic economies in these centers are *resilient*, that is, they fare *better* than do ethnic economies in other locations; and (2) ethnic economies in these centers are *fragile*, that is, they fare *worse* than do ethnic economies in other locations.

2. Black communities’ ethnic economies

In the early twentieth-century U.S., persons of African ancestry, commonly called blacks or black Americans, comprised the largest and

most conspicuous ethnic minority group (Davis and Donaldson, 1975). The vast majority of black Americans at the time were descendants of Africans who were enslaved agricultural workers in the southern region’s sprawling, white-owned plantation system. The black American population thus was heavily concentrated in the nation’s South before the twentieth century. Even after the 1861–1865 Civil War and Emancipation, most blacks remained in this region, often toiling in occupations reminiscent of slavery, such as sharecropping, and were oppressed by an institutionalized white-supremacy regime that was strictly sanctioned by anti-black segregation laws, political disenfranchisement, and vigilante violence (Higgs, 1977). Yet in the wake of mass urbanization following the 1915–1930 Great Black Migration, black communities emerged in the nation’s largest southern and northern cities, and in these communities, ethnic economies of black-owned establishments arose in professional, entrepreneurial, and cultural media pursuits (Gregory, 2005; Boyd, 2011, 2015).

Applying the above propositions, the present study analyzes early twentieth-century urban black communities, asking: Were the urban hierarchy’s most dominant centers during this time – namely, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia (Conzen, 1977) – exceptionally advantageous locations for black communities’ ethnic economies during the Great Depression, the nation’s most severe macro-economic decline? This question is anchored in the long-standing scholarly interest in ethnic economies and black communities, found in sociology (e.g., Waldinger et al., 1990b; Light and Gold, 2000) and urban geography (e.g., Kaplan, 1998; Kaplan and House-Soremekun, 2009; Darden and Thomas, 2013; Wang et al., 2014). The question also arises because, in both social-scientific and historical research, there are conflicting and heretofore unresolved interpretations of the soundness of the black communities that emerged in many major urban centers after the 1915–1930 Great Black Migration. As the following literature review suggests, these interpretations lead to divergent predictions about these communities’ fates during the Great Depression.

2.1. The received view

Pioneering explorations (e.g., Drake and Cayton, 1962; Frazier, 1966) characterize early twentieth-century urban black communities as beset with intractable social problems exacerbated by the Great Depression’s economic stagnation. According to the research, poor black migrants’ tremendous influx overwhelmed these communities with social ills resulting from the migrants’ rural southern heritage. Such ills allegedly included family breakup, non-marital childbearing, juvenile delinquency, and overcrowded housing (Sowell, 1981). Moreover, the studies imply that primary-group ties and cooperative relationships that might have stabilized these communities were quickly dissolved by the urbanism generated by major cities’ large, dense, and heterogeneous populations. In particular, internal socio-economic divisions and rampant individualism seemed to undermine collective business ventures that might have helped blacks gain an economic foothold in these cities (Light, 1972). And violent crime and social disorder in black communities presumably hastened the downfall of white tourists’ patronage of black entertainment districts after Prohibition’s repeal, leaving these districts dependent on trade with impoverished black consumers (Light, 1977). Seminal examinations of contemporary data further document formidable obstacles that urban black communities faced in the early twentieth century due to unprecedented racial segregation and hostility stemming from intensified prejudice and discrimination by those whites who perceived blacks as competitors in workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods (Wilson, 1978; Lieberson, 1980; Massey and Denton, 1993). Consistent with this line of historically grounded research, recent quantitative analyses find only mixed evidence of substantial economic gains by blacks as a result of migration to northern urban centers in the twentieth century (Boustan, 2009; Eichenlaub et al., 2010).

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