

Globalization and Racism: A Black Belt Region Perspective

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Globalization is the process of growing interconnection, interdependence and integration in the modern world, generated by growing economic, cultural and political cooperation and links, as well as by the need to respond together to global problems which can be solved only on a planetary scale (Symonides, 1998; Akinboye, 2007). Forces that propel globalization include the technological revolution, economic liberalization and democratic systems of governance. Critics of globalization have argued that the process has exploited people in developing countries, caused massive disruptions and produced few benefits. Supporters point to the significant reductions in poverty achieved by countries that have embraced integration with the world economy (The World Bank, 2004). Cynthia Moe-Lobeda (2002) poses that the reigning model of economic globalization threatens Earth's life systems, cultural integrity and diversity, and the lives of many who are poor in order that some might consume exorbitantly and a few accumulate vast wealth. She suggests that globalization subordinates democratic political power to unaccountable economic power and that the moral crises of global economic injustice today are integrally spiritual.

Marable (2000) substantiates that the original accumulation of capital used in industry in the U.S. and Europe came from the extraction of wealth from colonies, piracy and the African slave trade and that since the demise of slavery and the emergence of modern capitalism the process of Black underdevelopment has expanded and deepened. He asserts that racism in the U.S. evolved as a peculiar institution fueled by the slave labor in the Americas and Caribbean; and that conscious underdevelopment of Black people resulted from chattel slavery, sharecropping, lynching, peonage, industrial labor at low wages, and cultural chaos (Marable, 2000). Globalization and racism are clearly manifested today in the rural Black Belt Region of the Southern United States.

Persistent Poverty and the Black Belt

An assessment by Beale (1996) designated counties in the United States with more than 20% of their populations below poverty level incomes for the census periods (1960, 1980, 1990 and 2000) as persistent poverty counties. More than 540 out of 2,383 rural counties met this qualification of "persistently poor." These persistent poverty counties include those with populations of >25% African Americans, Hispanic Americans or Native American/Alaskans, respectively. In persistently poor counties the overall poverty rates result primarily from low income among blacks, Hispanics, American Indians and Alaskan natives, or the white population of the southern highland. In two-thirds of all counties with persistent high poverty, the high incidence reflects conditions in a minority population. Implicit is a direct relationship between location, persistent poverty and race that stems from historic and systematic exploitation of peoples of color – including expropriation of Native American lands/trail of tears, the Atlantic slave trade/slavery/sharecropping/exploitation of Black labor, and exploitation of Hispanic/Latino American labor.

For these "persistently poor" counties the poverty rate was 28.7% in 1990; twice that of all other rural counties, resulting primarily from low income among blacks, Hispanics, American

Indians and Alaskan natives, or the white population of the southern highland. In two-thirds of all counties with persistent high poverty, the high incidence reflects conditions in a minority population.

The Black Belt Region of the Southern U.S. was defined by Booker T. Washington as “counties where Blacks outnumber Whites (Washington, 1965). Today the Black Belt is defined as a social and demographic crescent of southern geography that contains a concentration of Black people (Wimberly et al. 1991; 1992; 1993). This region consists of southern counties having higher than average percentages of Black residents in eleven states—Virginia, North and South Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas and Tennessee. For the Black Belt states, 603 counties have more than the national average of 12.1 percent Black population; 379 counties have 25% or more Black residents (mostly rural).

In 255 of the persistent-poverty Black Belt counties, Blacks either are a majority of the poor, or it is only their high incidence of poverty that produces an overall county rate of 20 percent or more. The level of Black poverty is still over 50 percent in more than 100 Black persistent high poverty counties and under 30 percent in only two counties (Beale, 1996).

Social, Economic and Health Indices from four Black Belt Counties in Alabama

The Black Belt Region of Alabama is typically characterized by a rural, poor and largely African American population. Greene, Wilcox, Dallas and Macon Counties, respectively, have 100, 100, 47 and 50% rural populations versus Alabama and U.S. rural populations rates of 40% and 21%. Greene, Wilcox, Dallas and Macon Counties are predominantly African American at 79.7, 72.6, 66.9 and 82.8%, respectively, versus Alabama and U.S. rates of 26.4 and 12.8%. The 64.8, 59.5, 70.3 and 70.0 % high school graduates in Greene, Wilcox, Dallas and Macon Counties, respectively, are below the state and national averages of 75.3 and 80.4% (US Census Quick Facts (2007); US Census, 2000 and 2005). The number of students participating in the Free and Reduced Meal Program is an indicator of the concentration of poor students in the four target counties. The numbers of students eligible for Free or Reduced Price Meals in 2004, 2005 and 2006, respectively, were 92.7, 92.8 and 91.8% for Greene County; 100, 97.4, and 95.8% for Wilcox County; 81.1, 83.0 and 83.8% in Dallas County; and 69.3, 80.2 and 90.4% in Macon County. These percentages were substantially above the State wide averages of 50.7, 51.6 and 51.3 % respectively (Alabama Department of Education State Board of Education Report Cards, 2006).

Median household incomes of \$22, 439, \$19,682, \$24,949, and \$23,378 for Green, Wilcox, Dallas and Macon Counties, respectively, are significantly lower than the Alabama and national averages of \$37,062 and \$44,334. Greene, Dallas, Wilcox and Macon Counties have respective unemployment rates of 8.4, 12.0, 10.1 and 6.6% compared to state and national rates of 5.6% and 5.5%. Percent of persons below poverty are 26.8, 30.4, 27.4 and 28.3 for Green, Wilcox, Dallas and Macon Counties, respectively, compared to 16.1 and 12.1 for the state and nation. Percent of children in poverty are 44.1, 45.8, 41.0 and 44.8% for Greene, Wilcox, Dallas and Macon Counties, is significantly higher than the state and national levels, 20.7% and 16%, respectively (US Census Quick Facts, 2007); Institute for

Rural Health Black Belt Fact Book, 2000; Auburn University at Montgomery Center for Demographic Research, 2004).

Greene, Wilcox, Dallas and Macon Counties have significantly higher death rates from heart and other diseases and infant mortality rate compared to the state and national rates (County Health Profiles, Alabama Department of Public Health, 2005).

Table 1. Comparative Heart Disease and Infant Mortality Rates for four Alabama Black Belt Counties

	Death Rate Heart Disease	Infant Mortality Rate
United States	222.7	6.9
Alabama	280.8	5.7
Greene County	393.3	22.2*
Wilcox County	363.3	11.3
Dallas County	349.4	7.5
Macon County	451.6	11.5

Mathematics (and other) achievement scores by students in the middle school grades in Wilcox, Greene, Dallas and Macon Counties have been lower than that of our Nation and the State of Alabama achievement scores as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Stanford Achievement Test 10th Edition Percentile* of Seventh Grade Students in Mathematics

Year Tested	2003- 2004	2003- 2004	2003- 2004
State of Alabama	47	49	49
Greene County	34	29	25
Wilcox County	35	32	32
Dallas County (Selma)	38	37	33
Macon County	26	22	23

The above information indicates that young people and their families in the Black Belt of Alabama are faced with major challenges associated with persistent poverty and racism. Opportunities must significantly increase in education, employment, small business development, health care, and community development, under girded by strengthened cultural, spiritual and family development.

Globalization and the Black Belt

Alongside new global and regional hierarchies of cities and high-tech industrial districts lies a vast territory that has become increasingly peripheral, increasingly excluded from the major economic processes that fuel economic growth in the new global economy...not only in the less developed countries but also in the most advanced economies (Sassen, 1998). Thus, one link between globalization and rural Black Belt counties over-time has been the minimal development of industry with the exception of wood processing (linked to timber production) and textile processing (linked to cotton production). Today, the textile industry has all but left the Black Belt and relocated in Asia and Latin America. The systematic, limited economic investment by industry in the

Black Belt over the past 20-30 years can be directly linked to historical and residual effects of racism including inadequate infrastructure, health care and education; other Alabama counties, including adjacent non-Black Belt counties, have had diverse economic growth, while rural Black Belt counties have economically declined.

Though the rural Black Belt has been peripheral to and excluded from major economic processes for decades, it has been interesting to note in the last few years a movement by international manufacturing and finance corporations into the rural Black Belt counties of Alabama. Specific recent examples include SABID Plastics (formerly GE Plastics) in Lowndes County, Halla Climate Control Corporation in Macon County – linked to the recent location of Hyandi automobile manufacturing in Montgomery Alabama; RBC/Royal Canadian Bank in Macon County, and USS Steel in Sumter County – a carbon alloy synthesis facility and a cogeneration facility are forthcoming.

Also in recent years new alliances have formed to catalyze development of the Alabama Black Belt and its people. These alliances have brought together diverse leaders and organizations that have not previously worked together for this purpose. Included are progressive leaders from government, local communities, community based organizations, universities, and businesses. Examples of these new alliances include the Alabama Black Belt Action Commission, the Black Belt Community Foundation, and the Alabama Agricultural Land Grant Alliance. An under girding common goal is to uplift the quality of life of all people of the Black Belt, especially the poor and underserved. The fulfillment of this goal remains a challenge given the nature of the forces that propel globalization and foster racism. The hope for success resides within the resilience, creativity and collective positive spirit and actions of the people of the Black Belt.

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