

Harold Cruse: Cooperative Economic Association by Kimya Nuru Dennis and Rutledge M. Dennis

Note: The economic section of Dennis and Dennis, *The Intellectual Legacy of Harold Cruse*

Since the late 1960s and 1970s, Harold Cruse has given many scholars and intellectuals a host of reasons to read and re-read his many books and articles to ascertain if they contain solutions and insights to contemporary conflicts and problems. Indeed, a reading of Cruse is bound to get readers to rethink, or give second thoughts, to be issues where closure, or a foregone conclusion might seem obvious. The following comments are designed to have readers reflect on issues Cruse deemed important in the 1970s as he then reflected on the role and positions of Black Intellectuals in Black community economic development. The proposals Cruse advocated may seem radical, but we should not forget that in the 1970s, Cruse, along with other thinkers, believed that only radical, others thought, outrageous, proposals were necessary to move the American society in the desired direction, especially as illustrated in these pages, along new, creative, and revolutionary lines.

Du Bois's Negro Co-Operative Commonwealth, outlined in Chapter 7 of his book, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), was the first attempt to construct a national economic program designed to include only Black Americans. This more extensive version of the proposal he presented to the NAACP in 1934 resulted in his departure from the organization. Du Bois suggests his proposal as a national model for Black economic self-sufficiency. Cruse proposes his model first for Harlem, with hopes that it might be used nationally. But for now, Harlem is his experimental laboratory, and he is interested in resurrecting what he views as a dying Black community. Du Bois made the case for the racial self-segregation of his model based on the dire economic needs of Blacks during the Great Depression, but his model was opposed to the prevailing NAACP model of racial integration. Such a model, asserted by the leadership of the NAACP, was simply a duplication of the racial separation, and perhaps racial nationalism model, and a conservative format advocated decades ago by Booker T. Washington. Washington's model was built on the premise of a small, Black-controlled separate and segregated socio-economic structure whose existence largely depended on its willingness to maintain a subordinate role in the large white controlled and dominated socio-economic structure. Cruse's model to produce a culturally, politically, and economically enriched Harlem had similarities with Washington's southern model, for despite its size and existence in the north, Harlem was bereft of cultural, political, and economic power as it was just as dominated by whites in the north as the world of Washington was dominated by whites in the south. Cruse's point: white political, economic, and cultural power every bit as subservient as Blacks in southern communities were. A majority population does not necessarily translate into majority power.

The problem in adopting Cruse's views on racial and cultural pluralism, and he acknowledges this, is that white ethnic groups despite the subtle, or overt, tensions between them, can interact with each other in ways different from interactions with Black Americans. Thus, racial conflicts and cultural conflicts are more likely to surface with interracial pluralistic interaction than would be the case with just white ethnic plural interactions. This supposition is based on the premise that white ethnic groups have more in common with each other than they have with Blacks. Finally, Cruse in his discussions on pluralism makes the point that this country, or the larger

world, will never become free of prejudice, discrimination, or racism. But he is not simply telling Blacks to accept it and move on. More importantly, he is saying “spend your valuable time creating, developing, and sustaining the values, ideal, institutions, and organizations that will enrich what Du Bois called “the inner Black world.” To do that requires a movement away from the traditional emphasis on racial integration and a re-direction of efforts towards racial solidarity. Cruse’s program around this solidarity is largely outlined in his strategy for the development of Cooperative Economic Association presented in the next segment.

During the early years of the Great Depression of the 1930s, W.E.B. Du Bois, heretofore, a racial integrationist, and one of the leaders and founders of the NAACP, proposed the formation a large Black racially self-segregated organization, The Negro Co-Operative Commonwealth, which he hoped would not only relieve the Depression-era suffering of Black citizens, but one which would also give Black Americans greater economic self-sufficiency and independence. The NAACP Governing Board rejected Du Bois’s proposal, and he was forced to leave the organization. He was never able to get his program off the ground to the degree he desired, but he provides a rationale for his organization and an in-depth outline of his co-op strategy, in Chapter 7 of *Dusk of Dawn* (1940: 173-220); Cruse in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967: 85-95) resurrected Du Bois’s economic strategy as a possible remedy for Harlem’s socio-cultural-political-economic problems. As Harlem’s political, cultural, and economic autonomy is the goal, Cruse advocates drastic measures to stem what he believes is Harlem’s continual descent into disorganization and chaos. He believed Harlem needed more than a mere radical rebellion; it needed a combined cultural, political, and economic revolution.

Cruse divides the approaches to saving Harlem along cultural revolutionary lines and social organizational perspectives.

A. The Socio-cultural Revolutionary Agenda

i. A Harlem-wide boycott should be organized to take control and ownership of all cultural institutions (theatres, nightclub sites, and movie houses).

ii. These cultural institutions should be nationalized, operated, and administrated for the educational and cultural benefit of the Harlem community, under the control of Harlem community-wide citizens planning commissions.

iii. The Harlem community must abolish the “old economic” concept of individual rights inherent in the idea of private property.

iv. The Harlem community must adopt the concepts of cooperative and collective economic organization and administration of its inner community life.

B. The Social Organizational Revolutionary Agenda

i. Planning groups should be organized to overhaul Harlem’s social, cultural, political, and economic life.

ii. Blacks with business skills should come together to create business co-operatives to take over and supervise the buying, distribution, and selling of all basic commodities used and consumed in Harlem, such as food, clothing, luxuries, services, etc.

iii. The co-ops should eliminate much commodity duplications, lower prices, improve quality, and create jobs. Many of the excess stores could be converted into nurseries, supplementary classrooms, and medical dispensaries for drug addicts, etc.

iv. Citizens' committees should seek legal advice to combat crime and drug peddling.

v. Harlem needs an all-Black, community-wide political party to add bargaining force to social, cultural, and economic reforms.

vi. Harlem's housing should be collective, not private. Harlem should abolish the private landlord system and replace it with tenant's cooperative ownership, or municipally controlled housing.

vii. Citizens' planning groups should devise a new school of economics based on the prevalent class and community organizations. Such a school should address the need to develop a "new Black middle class" organized on the principle of cooperative economic ownership and technical administration.

viii. Citizens' planning committees should petition the Federal communications Commission on the social need to allocate television and radio facilities to community groups and cooperatives, rather than, as the current policies dictate, only to private interests.

Cruse believes the above goals are achievable. He simply believes no Black leader, or organization, has asked Black Americans to develop the discipline, self-denial, and cooperative organizations to devote time and energy towards developing the Black Inner World. Instead, the overwhelming time and energy exerted by Black Americans have been spent trying to integrate into the large dominant white world. Whereas, Cruse understands very much why this was done, he also looks at a largely disorganized inner Black world and ponders how that Black World would have looked had Blacks spent less time trying to enter and integrate with the larger outer world, and more time, as other racial/ethnic groups did, the Black inner world (communities), would have been strengthened and Black communities would have had a greater and stronger cultural and economic legacy and foundation to pass on to future generations.

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