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Fomenting Democracy: The Case for Federal – Local Cooperation

Marilyn Sinkewicz*, Jess Gilbert & Calvin Head*****

Introduction

Rural America is usually seen as the most conservative part of the United States and, in general, this is correct, Witness the vote for Donald Trump in the recent presidential election. Rural areas, however, are not homogenous. Particularly in bi- or multi-race/ethnic regions, there are sharp differences in political values and voting patterns. The rural South offers a case in point. This article highlights an African American community in the Mississippi Delta formed around the crucial but divisive issues of land, food, and democracy. The meaning of “democracy” here refers not only to voting for public representatives—important as that is—but, perhaps even more crucial, to the redistribution of political and economic power and resources from elites to middle- and lower-income people. This kind of democracy demands that those affected by a decision should have some say in its making.

Today Mileston, Mississippi, a hamlet in Holmes County, boasts a successful vegetable production and marketing cooperative of black farmers that includes a youth-in-agriculture project. Its success grows out of the past eighty years during which the Mileston community has stood as a bastion of black-

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owned farmland and grass-roots activism. Through the two most reformist episodes in modern American history, the New Deal of the 1930s and the War on Poverty of the 1960s, Mileston partnered with the federal government to bring about land reform and community development. Together they created new institutions that spurred local capacity-building and citizen empowerment. This process culminated in Mileston's position at the forefront of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. More recently, the Obama Administration provided significant material and symbolic resources to the Mileston Cooperative and its youth project. These initiatives continue to bolster well-being and life-chances in the immediate area and the region. But how will this democratizing federal-local partnership fare under the new Trump Administration? Will it thrive? Can it be scaled up to other communities? Or will it struggle even to survive?

The Mileston Youth-in-Agriculture Project

The Mileston youth-in-agriculture project consists of several interrelated parts: ready access to land, technology, markets, and local knowledge; plenty of young people eager to work, learn, and grow; a nurturing community and inspired leadership with a history of success; and recent support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

First is the land base. Due to its distinctive history, summarized in the next section, the Mileston community contains a critical mass of high-quality farm land owned by resident African American farmers. The cooperative members own 3,000 acres although, at present, only a small portion is devoted to the youth project. The members contribute agricultural knowledge, equipment, and hoop-houses as well as the ground needed for garden plots. As with any business, markets are critical. The youth project sells to a wide range of buyers: senior citizens and locals in the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program who benefit from fresh, healthy vegetables; local supermarkets; high-end restaurants in Jackson; food giants such as Sysco and Walmart; and a food hub named Up in Farms.

Like youth everywhere, Mileston's teenagers need and seek adult mentoring, productive activities, workforce skills, and access to employment. The high-value produce venture engages over thirty high school students, with many more waiting to join as soon as the operation can expand. The youngsters are involved in all aspects of the commercial vegetable business: soil preparation, planting, transplanting from hoop-houses to fields, weeding, watering, pest-control, harvesting, machine-repair, packaging, marketing, distribution, and accounting.¹ In addition, they learn the USDA guidelines for organic certification as well as certification in Good Agricultural Practices. Young people also operate a cold-storage and food-packaging facility, certified with official Good Handling Practices. The structure was built with local funds and the USDA contributed the equipment.

Their engagement with hands-on training in large-scale vegetable production and management allows Mileston youth to earn money and acquire job skills and knowledge about sustainable agriculture.² Recently a Mileston Co-op teenager so impressed the USDA certifiers that they invited him to Atlanta to teach other producers about the relevant processes and guidelines. Moreover, the young participants have developed expansive visions of their personal futures. Unlike many of their peers, they are strikingly ambitious. For instance, one fifteen year old plans to become a plant scientist. When Mileston teenagers speak to other community groups about their knowledge, experiences, and dreams, audiences are rapt and inevitably desirous to provide such opportunities for their own young people.

On the federal side, the Obama Administration made important contributions to Mileston. First, Lady Michelle Obama and her organic vegetable garden on the White House lawn were meaningful icons for young black growers. Programmatically, the USDA under President Obama expanded the previous Bush initiative that advanced farmers' markets and nutrition for low-income people. These public policies enabled

1. Habiba Alcindor, *Mississippi Growing*, THE NATION, Sept. 21, 2009, at 31-32.

2. Habiba Alcindor, *Mississippi Growing*, THE NATION, Sept. 21, 2009, at 31-32.

folks in the area to enjoy fresh, high-quality fruits and vegetables while also improving the bottom line for the youth enterprise. Additionally, the Secretary of Agriculture makes many appointments to agency positions at the state level, and the views of those who fill these posts directly affect local communities. For example, the Administration appointed Curt Readus to lead the Mississippi Natural Resources Conservation Service. State Conservationist Readus set aside \$3 million to assist limited-resource vegetable growers with irrigation, hoop-houses, cover crops, plastic mulch, and crop rotation. Fourteen Mileston Co-op farmers now participate in this federal-state partnership which, for the first time (under Mr. Readus), devoted funds to specialty crops like vegetables instead of directing them all to large rice producers. This, again, provided positive repercussions and opportunities for the youth project. Lastly, to insure that its county offices were actually carrying out such policy goals, the USDA monitored implementation at the local level. Here is another programmatic innovation for the federal agency, one that significantly benefitted minority growers. In sum, the partnership between the federal government and the Mileston youth-in-agriculture project is an exemplary model of community development and more—democratization on the ground.

Mileston's Deep History of Democratic Community Development

As mentioned earlier, the Mileston Cooperative that sustains the youth-in-agriculture project has a remarkable history. It begins with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal land-reform experiments that established one hundred new rural communities. The federal government assisted sharecroppers and tenant farmers to become landowning farmers. Thirteen of these community developments were all-black, including Mileston. In 1936, the Resettlement Administration (RA) purchased 9,400 acres of high-quality ground south of Tchula, Mississippi, and 110 black landless farm families moved onto homesteads averaging 75 acres in size. Each family secured long-term government loans to buy their farm, which included necessities such as a modest new

house, barn, privy, water well, chicken coop, smokehouse, farm implements, varied livestock, and household goods. In Mileston, the RA also built public facilities including a school, cotton gin, health clinic, and cooperative store that doubled as a community center. The new landowners added their own churches.³

Resettlement Communities like Mileston incorporated two key yet controversial features, cooperativism and technical assistance. The Farm Security Administration (FSA), which soon absorbed the RA, worked with the farmers to organize numerous enterprises structured as co-ops: gins, dairies, sawmills, orchards, handicrafts, wood lots, livestock breeding, medical associations, and marketing, just to name a few. Each project claimed two full-time professionals, who were usually African Americans. An agricultural supervisor worked with the farmers to advance diversified production, scientific practices, and general knowledge; a home economist taught nutrition, gardening, child care, and canning. These cooperative and educational activities themselves became “schools of democracy” and experiments in group problem-solving—lessons that proved to be useful in the future. However, not everyone approved of such democratization. In 1943, an anti-New Deal Congress gutted the FSA and demanded liquidation of the community projects.⁴

3. SIDNEY BALDWIN, *POVERTY AND POLITICS: THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION* (1968); MICHAEL R. GREY, *NEW DEAL MEDICINE: THE RURAL HEALTH PROGRAMS OF THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION* (2002); Jess Gilbert, *Democratizing States and the Use of History*, 74 *RURAL SOC.* 3 (2009); Jess Gilbert & Spencer D. Wood, Paper Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society: Experiments in Land Reform and Racial Justice: The New Deal State and Local African-Americans Remake Civil Society in the Rural South, 1935-2004 (Aug. 2004); Spencer D. Wood, *The Roots of Black Power: Land, Civil Society, and the State in the Mississippi Delta, 1935-1968* (2006) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison).

4. SIDNEY BALDWIN, *POVERTY AND POLITICS: THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION* 365-404 (1968); PAUL K. CONKIN, *TOMORROW A NEW WORLD: THE NEW DEAL COMMUNITY PROGRAM* 186-233 (1959); DONALD HOLLEY, *UNCLE SAM'S FARMERS: THE NEW DEAL COMMUNITIES IN THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI VALLEY* 122-37, 261-78 (1975); Jess Gilbert, *Democratizing States and the Use of History*, 74 *RURAL SOC.* 3, 3-24 (2009); Jess Gilbert & Spencer D. Wood, Paper Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society: Experiments in Land Reform and Racial Justice: The New Deal State and Local African-Americans Remake Civil Society in the Rural South, 1935-2004 (Aug. 2004); Spencer D. Wood, *The Roots of Black Power: Land, Civil Society, and the State in the Mississippi Delta, 1935-1968* (2006) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin Madison).

Despite federal withdrawal, Mileston and the other Resettlement Communities flourished during the post-World War II period and throughout the 1960s as well. Practically all the children graduated from the project high school (taught by black teachers), and a surprisingly high number attended college and beyond. In fact, they became some of the first African American educators, doctors, and lawyers in the area.

Further, Mileston played a pivotal role in the emerging civil rights movement, at no small peril to residents' lives and livelihoods. In the 1960s, the farm families housed workers from the Student Nonviolent Organizing Committee (SNCC), led demonstrations in the county seat and state capital, became the first blacks to register to vote, challenged the agricultural establishment, and organized the state's strongest chapter of the anti-racist Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Not only did some Mileston farmers run for political office, but the community helped elect the first African American since Reconstruction to the Mississippi legislature.

Through President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, the Mileston community significantly expanded its institution-building with new resources such as a health center and new programs such as Head Start. Notably, the mother of Calvin Head, the founder/director of the youth-in-agriculture project, led the Head Start program in Mileston for decades. Thus we see that the original New Deal Resettlement Community Program has evolved into today's co-op and its youth-in-agriculture project—the rich legacy of the democratizing partnership between the federal government and local citizen-farmers.⁵

Prospects under the Trump Administration

5. Lester M. Salamon, *The Time Dimension in Policy Evaluation: The Case of the New Deal Land-Reform Experiments*, 27 PUB. POL'Y 129, 129–83 (1979); Jess Gilbert & Spencer D. Wood, Paper Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society: Experiments in Land Reform and Racial Justice: The New Deal State and Local African-Americans Remake Civil Society in the Rural South, 1935-2004 (Aug. 2004); Spencer D. Wood, *The Roots of Black Power: Land, Civil Society, and the State in the Mississippi Delta, 1935-1968* (2006) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin Madison).

The New Deal Resettlement Community Program, the 1960s War on Poverty, and Obama's agriculture and community development policies underscore the profound ways that government can deepen and even foment democracy. This happens when the state provides transformative assistance to under-resourced communities. Such social action is simply beyond the capacity of the private sector. Even so, some today reject the notion that government can help democratize communities.

Policy history shows that conservatives have advanced particular programs for the poor. For example, several of the Obama Administration's initiatives were clearly extensions of Bush-era policies that supported farmers' markets and improved nutrition for low-income groups. Currently, a central tenet of President Trump's agenda is the creation and retention of jobs for U.S. citizens. The Mileston project certainly excels in job training, and its young participants are acquiring skills that make them attractive to employers and colleges. The continuation and even expansion of such programs should be eminently endorsable.

However, the Mileston project directs our attention to a policy vision that is largely absent from President Trump's discourse on support for a middle class under duress. Will such evidence convince the new administration that the government is uniquely positioned to furnish poor people and communities with the benefits that many others already enjoy? It is not a matter of acting on or reforming those on the margins. Rather, the government's job is to ensure that all people are free to be engaged citizens in a functioning democracy. We know that it can happen because it has. This is a vision that the Trump Administration should embrace, one that provides equitable access to power and resources for poor citizens so that they can join the vaunted middle class.