THE BLACK POWER AND CHICANO MOVEMENTS IN THE POVERTY WARS IN LOS ANGELES

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This article explores three distinct community action agencies (CAAs) created as part of the War on Poverty in Los Angeles and their connection to movements for cultural and economic empowerment. The city’s “official” War on Poverty agency eventually collapsed under the weight of intransigence by city officials, differences among black leaders and civil rights activists, and divisions between blacks and Latinos in part fueled by the Black Power and Chicano movements. Meanwhile, African Americans and Latinos used the inspiration of those movements and the support of labor unions to establish separate CAAs outside of the domain of the “official” War on Poverty agency. Those ethnically distinct “community unions” provided a sense of racial/ethnic/cultural pride and solidarity for Latino and African American neighborhoods and communities in Los Angeles. This article demonstrates how the shifting boundaries of race shaped the development of the War on Poverty in Los Angeles and that the War on Poverty encouraged movements for cultural and economic empowerment.

Keywords: Los Angeles; War on Poverty; Chicano movement; Black Power movement; Watts

As part of the American West, Los Angeles has been more racially diverse from its inception than cities in other regions of the country. Indeed, Richard White has argued that it is the region’s unique history of race relations and its multiracial population from early in its history that gives the American West its true distinctiveness. That is certainly true of Los Angeles. In fact, the initial founders of Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciúncula in 1781 were of Mexican and/or African descent. Thus, multiracialism always has been a significant part of the social fabric of Los Angeles.

The federal government’s War on Poverty in the 1960s added to and altered some of the permutations of race in the city. Indeed, race and racial politics acted as both a stimulus and a hindrance to the War on Poverty in Los Angeles. Some scholars, most notably Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, focused on the origins of the War on Poverty and argued that the social unrest of the civil rights movement led directly to the War on Poverty. This article, focused on the implementation of the policy, argues that the War on Poverty intersected with a multifaceted and evolving collection of movements for cultural, political, and economic empowerment in Los Angeles. Gareth Davies, in his *From...
Opportunity to Entitlement, also notes the connection between the implementation of the War on Poverty and the civil rights movement, but his work is focused more on the shift from opportunity to entitlement in federal policy. Davies, Jill Quadagno, and Judith Russell all emphasize race in their treatments of the War on Poverty, but their discussions of race are biracial (black and white), not multiracial.

This article looks at three distinct community action agencies (CAAs) created as part of the War on Poverty in Los Angeles—one “official” (controlled by local governments) and two “unofficial” (one controlled by African Americans and one by Mexican Americans) agencies. It demonstrates that while the “official” War on Poverty collapsed under the weight of intransigence by city officials, differences among black leaders and civil rights activists, and divisions between blacks and Latinos, the “unofficial” War on Poverty continued in racial/ethnic centers of Los Angeles. African Americans and Latinos, inspired by the separatist ethos of the Black Power and Chicano movements and encouraged and aided by labor unions, established separate War on Poverty organizations outside of the domain of the “official” War on Poverty agency under Los Angeles city and county control. Indeed, these ethnically distinct “community unions” provided services and a sense of racial/ethnic/cultural pride and solidarity for Latino and African American neighborhoods and communities in Los Angeles in spaces of meaning to the residents of those neighborhoods and communities. In Los Angeles, then, the War on Poverty encouraged movements of cultural and economic empowerment. African Americans and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, supported by labor unions, used the framework of the War on Poverty to pursue those goals separately, rather than as an interracial movement of the poor.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE WAR ON POVERTY IN LOS ANGELES

African Americans had been among the founders of the city of Los Angeles, but their numbers there remained relatively small until the early twentieth century. With the influx of whites and blacks in the early twentieth century, blacks in Los Angeles faced increased discrimination and segregation in all aspects of life, including jobs and housing. The suburb of Glendale, for instance, boasted in the 1920s that “no Negro ever sleeps overnight in our city.” Racially restrictive covenants circumscribed blacks to the Central Avenue District and Watts, a residential area seven miles south of downtown Los Angeles. Surrounded by the all-white communities of South Gate, Lynwood, and Bell, residents of Watts faced economic, social, and spatial isolation. Black activists fought this repression from the outset. In 1910, Charlotta Spears Bass helped her husband found the California Eagle, the first black-owned newspaper in California, and crusaded against racial discrimination. Blacks in Los
Angela established a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in 1913 and a National Urban League (NUL) chapter in 1921. Civil rights organizations in Los Angeles experienced a significant upsurge in the 1940s with the mass migration of African Americans to the West, particularly to Los Angeles, for war industry jobs. Between 1940 and 1946, the African American population of Los Angeles expanded by seventy thousand. Likewise, membership in civil rights organizations in Los Angeles burgeoned dramatically during the war and immediate postwar years.5

Los Angeles’s black civil rights organizations, whose membership shrunk during the 1950s Red Scare, experienced more failure than success in the early 1960s. Attempts to increase African American representation on the city council by influencing the reapportionment process in 1960 to 1961 largely failed when the city council divided black neighborhoods and created only one district with a black majority. Similarly, civil rights organizations failed in 1961 in an attempt to have Tom Bradley appointed to the vacant tenth district council seat. African Americans gained a significant measure of political success, however, in 1963, when Bradley, Billy Mills, and Gilbert Lindsay were all elected to the city council.6

Those electoral victories, though, were tempered somewhat by an apparent widening of class differences among African Americans. Class distinctions historically had never been as significant for blacks as for whites since African Americans had generally not been allowed to participate fully in the American economy. Class differences among African Americans tended to center around lifestyle and values, or perhaps among more established residents versus newcomers, more so than income. The World War II and postwar economic boom created, relatively speaking, more wealth for many African Americans and created certain class distinctions based more on income, home ownership, and other economic variables than in the period prior to World War II. Some African Americans, then, took advantage of their newfound ability to purchase homes in the suburbs, which created some class divisions in the political representation of blacks in Los Angeles. For instance, the tenth district represented by Bradley consisted primarily of an upwardly mobile black middle class in the Baldwin Hills area, about ten miles west of south-central Los Angeles. The eighth council district, represented by Mills, consisted primarily of lower-income, unemployed, and underemployed blacks in south-central Los Angeles. At times, this physical separation of the black middle class in Baldwin Hills and other neighborhoods outside of the Central Avenue District and Watts created social and political factionalism.7

Somewhat buoyed by their electoral success, civil rights organizations united in a campaign to end segregation in Los Angeles. In 1963, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, and the United Civil Rights Committee (UCRC), a local organization led by Reverend H. H. Brookins, the pastor of the First AME Church of Los Angeles, united to attempt to end segregated schools in Los Angeles and led the opposition against Proposition 14.
which would overturn the Rumford Fair housing Law. Both efforts failed. Thus, by 1965, civil rights organizations had won three city council seats, but lost in their efforts to challenge segregated housing and schools in Los Angeles.\(^8\) Undeterred by their losses on housing and schools, or perhaps because of those losses, civil rights organizations in Los Angeles in 1964 to 1965 began to turn their attention to the newly created War on Poverty.

African American leaders in Los Angeles generally supported the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty but wanted to ensure participation of African Americans in the initiative. The civil rights movement and the War on Poverty both sought to open the doors of opportunity for African Americans. And African Americans in Los Angeles clearly saw the War on Poverty framework as a means by which to achieve the economic, social, and political goals of the civil rights movement. But African Americans at times disagreed over the structure and control of the War on Poverty.

Shortly after the creation of the War on Poverty and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), a group of black professionals began to meet at the home of Opal Jones, a social worker, to discuss the reform of Los Angeles’s welfare system. These men and women created the Economic Opportunity Federation (EOF), a private agency to compete with the Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency (EYOA) (the planned city/county War on Poverty agency) to be the CAA for Los Angeles and prevent local government agencies from controlling the implementation of the War on Poverty.\(^9\) At this point, at least some African Americans were arguing for inclusion and representation in a city agency.

Los Angeles Mayor Samuel Yorty refused to include significant community participation in the EYOA, which resulted in the denial of funding from the OEO. In response to Yorty’s stonewalling, some black community and civic leaders formed a Community Anti-Poverty Committee (CAPC) to overcome the impasse. The committee consisted of U.S. Congressman Augustus (Gus) Hawkins, Reverend Brookins, and others. They opposed Yorty’s proposal that demanded the joint powers (i.e., the city and county) control the board. CAPC argued that the agency needed more representation of the poor and a smaller number of government representatives on the board. Brookins accused Yorty of “playing politics with poverty.”\(^10\)

Representatives of seven different community agencies, including CAPC, expressed their opposition to a proposed compromise that increased community representation but maintained public agency dominance. At a city council meeting on July 8, 1965, they argued that the proposal would exclude representation of the poor. When the county Board of Supervisors voted on July 13 to approve the agreement, demonstrators marched outside the County Hall of Administration. A predominantly African American gathering of a few thousand carried signs denouncing city and county officials and protesting the official agency proposals as being unrepresentative of the poor and minorities. Brookins and Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. led the demonstrations. King had come to Los Angeles specifically to show support for Reverend Brookins’s
poverty board plan. In a press conference, King spoke in measured tones about the need for true “maximum feasible participation” and implicitly attacked Yorty:

I hope . . . that the poverty bill will not be used by any officials of government for their own patronage but will be used for the people for which it is intended. . . . If this poverty bill is to have meaning in the community, the people who have been victimized will have to have a part in the shaping of the program and their own destinies.¹¹

King and Brookins demonstrated that at least some civil rights leaders saw the War on Poverty as a way to help bring about economic and racial justice and an expansion of American democracy. They clearly saw the War on Poverty framework as one that could help achieve some of the democratic goals of the civil rights movement. The focus remained on inclusion and representation, but issues such as cultural identity and group empowerment were emerging as important factors.

Not all members of the black community, however, agreed with King and Brookins. Indeed, members of Brookins’s ministerial fraternity in Los Angeles disagreed vehemently with him on the structure and control of Los Angeles’s War on Poverty. A few days after the protest in front of the County Hall of Administration, a group of black ministers met to discuss the War on Poverty stalemate. In a meeting rife with personal attacks, the ministers voted 43-26 to accept the Yorty proposal. The Reverend E. V. Hill, the conservative pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, led the supporters of this proposal. Hill had openly backed Yorty in the 1963 election and remained close to Yorty throughout his tenure as mayor (Hill later received funding from EYOA for organizing an antipoverty project).¹² The vote reflected some of the growing class tensions among African Americans as well as differing perspectives on the direction of the movement for civil rights.

The Watts revolt on August 11, 1965, coincided with and accelerated the transition from interracialism to black power. It also was connected directly to the War on Poverty. The majority of Watts residents were poor. More than 250,000 people lived in the fifty-square-mile area of Watts—four times as many people per square block as in the rest of Los Angeles. Two-thirds of residents were on welfare and 34 percent of adult males were unemployed.¹³

Commentators of various political persuasions and residents of the area recognized a connection between the failure of the poverty program and the Watts revolt. The Marxist W.E.B. DuBois club of Los Angeles argued that the failure of the city to comply with OEO community participation requirements comprised one of the primary reasons for the Watts revolt. In their list of recommendations on how to solve the problems in Los Angeles, second behind the firing of Police Chief William Parker was the removal of obstacles to War on Poverty funding. J. Stanley Sanders, an attorney and Watts native, argued that “the prominent issue” that led to the Watts revolt “was the holdup of poverty
funds. . . . There was a lot of dissension and ill will on account of that.” Father Samuel Morrison, a white Episcopal priest serving in South Central and an active member of the local chapter of the CORE, put the attitude of many of the revolt participants bluntly:

We’ve been asking, pleading for better housing, better facilities and by burning these buildings down we can show Mayor Yorty and his friends that they can’t sit on that anti-poverty money and not let us have it.14

The Watts revolt, then, in part reflected a growing disenchantment with the city’s failure to establish a War on Poverty agency as well as disillusionment with the inclusive possibilities of postwar liberalism. For many blacks in Los Angeles, the philosophy of black nationalism had more appeal than interracialism and liberalism.

The southern civil rights movement, focused on voting rights and desegregating public facilities, seemed to have little pertinence for blacks in Los Angeles. African Americans in Los Angeles could vote and ride on buses and eat at lunch counters. Instead, some working-class African Americans in Los Angeles likely identified more with the separatist philosophy of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam (NOI) and their focus on economic power than with the integrationist ideology of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). For those blacks who adhered to the ideology of black nationalism, America was a completely racialized nation that was corrupt to the core and would never welcome blacks as equal. White resistance to African American civil rights and participation in the War on Poverty provided stark evidence of the pervasiveness of America’s “racial nationalism.”15

In fact, Malcolm X and the NOI had made significant inroads among blacks in Los Angeles after 1962, when they aggressively and openly supported a group of black Muslims from Los Angeles accused of shooting police officers in a case that reeked of police brutality. From that point, the Black Muslim presence in Los Angeles grew significantly. Some of the growth of the NOI in Los Angeles was based on class differences, real or perceived. Some blacks in Watts felt middle class African Americans, who were more likely to be lighter in skin color, looked down on them as poor and dark-skinned. The NOI was able to draw some of these blacks away from traditional Christian churches. One participant in the Watts revolt, who had joined the NOI, disdained the middle-class leaders in Los Angeles’s black community as not “worth anything” and asserted that they did not “care about poor people.” On August 15, 1965, Marquette Frye, one of the brothers arrested in the incident that sparked the violence in Watts, spoke at a gathering of Black Muslims in Los Angeles and argued that the violence in Watts was a manifestation of the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Watts, indeed, “marked a shift toward nationalism and away from integration, toward racial conservatism and away from liberalism.”16 And both
the Watts revolt and black nationalism would further the resistance of some African Americans to a city-controlled War on Poverty.

That resistance demonstrated itself in the negative reception given to a compromise settlement arranged by LeRoy Collins, President Johnson’s handpicked negotiator. Indeed, the CAPC members “were furious. They were unhappy with the agreement, unhappy with their lack of involvement in details of negotiations . . . and unhappy with Brookins’ statement and weak negotiating role.” The CAPC members believed they had been sold out. They had demanded representation on the board, but had not been consulted before the compromise was agreed upon.17

On his last night in Los Angeles, after the agreement had already been reached, Collins, at the request of Hawkins and Brookins, attended a community meeting in Watts to discuss the antipoverty settlement. After the meeting, Collins realized the importance of participation to the people in Watts. Collins knew if community participation and empowerment were not achieved, the EYOA troubles would continue. He ended his report in an ominous tone, which President Johnson “brooded over for weeks.”18

Although the rioting has ended, the underlying causes remain. The poverty program will help get at these causes. . . . But the biggest and most dangerous ingredient is a feeling on the part of the Negro community in Los Angeles that they are “out of it.” They will continue to risk riots, in my opinion, until some means are found for giving those people a genuine sense of participation in the affairs of the community at large. . . . I have an uneasy feeling that things are far from settled in Los Angeles. While we reached an agreement which made it possible to get the anti-poverty program off the ground, the struggle over who is to represent the poor in that program will, in my opinion, continue.19

Collins was right in his assessment of the situation. Lack of participation and the need for a sense of control over their own lives resonated with the residents of South-Central Los Angeles. Self-determination and empowerment mattered. To some, participation in a city-controlled agency was less appealing now than before Watts. As interracialism gave way to black power, blacks were less than enthusiastic about Los Angeles’s War on Poverty. Why participate in a corrupt system controlled by white elites?

**THE WAR ON POVERTY AND BLACK POWER:**
**THE WATTS LABOR COMMUNITY ACTION COMMITTEE**

For some African Americans in Los Angeles, the answer was to create a black community-controlled antipoverty agency. That organization was the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC). Local activists joined with labor union representatives and officially founded WLCAC in the spring of 1965, largely due to disenchantment with the EYOA. Their intent was to use their union skills and organizational experience to increase community
participation, provide services to Watts residents, and build a thriving economic base in the community. Tired of the portrayal of Watts residents as hopeless and helpless, WLCAC organized with specific programmatic goals like creating a food and clothes bank, child care and youth centers, health care centers, and a county hospital for the Watts area.20

WLCAC’s union support was vital to its creation and survival, and the organization was formed as the first “community union” model of a community action agency. The UAW in particular was instrumental in the creation of WLCAC. UAW President Walter Reuther and Western Regional Director Paul Schrade canvassed local UAW membership in Watts and helped build a core of support for the new organization. Both Reuther and Schrade had actively supported the black freedom movement. They saw the War on Poverty as an “opportunity in which long-standing policies and practices were open to question and change” and believed that the way to “create change . . . is by building community organizations.”21

Central to WLCAC was the idea of community control. Shortly after its creation, the committee’s original chair, Otis T. Ireland, outlined the WLCAC’s philosophy:

The committee will stress very specific projects in which local residents have expressed an interest, with our members and consultants going door to door in Watts getting the opinions of the residents. We are already making this kind of personal contact, and will continue to this the major part of our program.22

The concepts of community control, self-empowerment, and self-determination would remain central to the philosophy of WLCAC.

Shortly after the Watts revolt, WLCAC, under the leadership of its new president Ted Watkins, began a more assertive and persistent effort to urge OEO and the local governments for antipoverty and direct-action programs. That shift to a more assertive approach led to more generous responses from both local and federal agencies. For instance, in May 1967, Watkins convinced Robert Kennedy, Joe Clark, and George Murphy, members of the Senate Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment and Poverty, to visit Watts and WLCAC. As a direct result of their visit, OEO granted WLCAC more than $250,000 for various programs, including a credit union, which was vital to the community, because previously residents had difficulty obtaining loans or were charged higher interest rates because of their race.23

WLCAC included some of the War on Poverty programs (such as Neighborhood Youth Corps) in its repertoire, but most of its programs were its own creations and emphasized community control. They included community ownership and operation of two service stations, a poultry farm, grocery store, truck farm, credit union, coin laundry, furniture and appliance shop, food stamp centers, community centers, a commercial center, and a building and supply store.24
One of WLCAC’s original creations was the New Deal–like Community Conservation Corps (CCC). A brainchild of Watkins, who remembered the New Deal fondly, the CCC used funding from various sources for fourteen- to fifteen-year-olds to convert vacant lots into visible playgrounds. Begun in the summer of 1966 as a way to keep youth busy in constructive ways, the program combined work training projects and artistic pursuits. The CCC members made bookshelves for Head Start sites, cleaned streets, helped create parks, and learned shop and automotive skills. In addition, they also attended educational classes about black heritage and culture and made important material contributions to their community.25

WLCAC’s most significant non-youth-based project was the Martin Luther King, Jr. Medical Center in South-Central Los Angeles. The need for a county hospital facility in the Watts area was one of the primary reasons WLCAC formed in 1964. At that time, Watts residents had to travel fifteen miles, often in heavy traffic, to reach a hospital. Watkins saw a new hospital as not only filling a health care need but also as an economic base for the community. He was right. Since the Martin Luther King, Jr. Hospital opened its doors, more Watts residents have worked there than at any other private or public employer in the area.26

Central to the philosophy of WLCAC and to its connection to the ideas of black nationalism were the programs that focused on cultural enrichment and black pride. WLCAC established a Works Progress Administration (WPA)–like writer’s workshop that turned out film writers, poets, and teachers. WLCAC also constructed the Watts Happening Coffee House as a center for cultural and intellectual development. Events at Watts Happening included jazz concerts, folk and gospel sing-alongs, artist exhibits, and presentations of plays and poetry. Perhaps the most explicit example of black pride and the focus on Afro-American culture was the Watts Festival Summer Parade. Initiated by local members of black nationalist groups and sponsored by the WLCAC, the parade celebrated black culture and the Watts community.27

It was this Afro-American focus that helped make the WLCAC viable for decades. Thwarted by the institutional racism of city politics in Los Angeles and disappointed by the failure of attempted interracial alliances, blacks turned to the WLCAC as the black freedom movement shifted its emphasis from integration to economic self-determination and black power.

THE CHICANO MOVEMENT AND BLACK-LATINO CONFLICTS OVER THE WAR ON POVERTY

WLCAC, a War on Poverty community agency influenced by the Black Power Movement, was created about the same time that Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, in part out of competition with blacks for War on Poverty funds, looked to create their own institutions focused on cultural self-determination in
East Los Angeles, a predominantly Mexican American community about ten miles northeast of Watts and just east of downtown. Any discussion of black-Latino relations in Los Angeles must note that these relations, often tense, took place within the larger reality of white racism and segregation. Blacks and Latinos both faced employment discrimination as well as racially restrictive covenants that excluded them from some of the area’s industrial cities, such as South Gate and Vernon. Since both groups were considered second-class citizens by many white Angelenos, blacks and Latinos often found themselves in competition for political and economic leftovers. In fact, some historians have suggested that local elites may have been more willing to appoint and support black political candidates, such as Tom Bradley, in the 1960s because they were more frightened by the size of the Latino population. Indeed, the numbers of persons of Mexican descent living in Los Angeles doubled from more than 150,000 in 1950 to just fewer than 300,000 in 1960. During the postwar period, Mexican Americans, who had lived in scattered communities throughout greater Los Angeles, became increasingly segregated into East Los Angeles.28

Within that system of white segregation and racism, Los Angeles’s blacks and Latinos had a history of disagreement and strife formed over competition for jobs that began during World War II and continued into the 1960s. Several attempts at interracial coalitions were made during and after the war, including the Southeast Interracial Council, the Council for Civic Unity, and the County Committee for Interracial Progress, but they all floundered on the rocks of anticommunism and divisions between and within black and Mexican American communities. A small group of black activists formed the Democratic Minority Conference in the early 1960s and attempted to create an alliance between the city’s blacks and Chicanos, but did not succeed. When Mexican American city councilman Ed Roybal, who had served on the council since 1949, left after his election to Congress in 1962, he was replaced by Gilbert Lindsay, an African American. The replacement of the only Mexican American council member with an African American angered some in the Latino community. When the United Civil Rights Committee formed in 1963, it refused to include Mexican Americans as members. In May 1965, just a few months prior to the violence in Watts, the County Human Relations Commission reported a high degree of tension between blacks and Latinos. Indeed, a 1965 study found that only 16 percent of Mexican Americans surveyed supported any type of black-Chicano coalition.29

Mexican American leaders responded to Watts and the creation of the War on Poverty in Los Angeles with a determination to compete with African Americans for War on Poverty programs and funds. This competition occurred at a time when traditional integrationist Mexican American leadership organizations, such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the GI Forum, and the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) were being challenged by younger people who would, in the late 1960s, inspired by
black nationalism, form the separatist, economic nationalist Brown Berets and La Raza Unida. Thus, traditional Mexican American organizations hesitated aligning with African Americans because they wanted to ensure that Mexican Americans received their share of the War on Poverty pie. Younger leaders opposed aligning with African American civil rights organizations because of a separatist ethnic and economic ideology. Both hoped to use the War on Poverty to create organizations and programs benefiting Mexican American communities. The War on Poverty, as Rodolfo Acuña has argued, encouraged competition between African Americans and Latinos, “each wanting control of their portion of the windfall funds that suddenly came to the communities.”

Shortly after the EYOA settlement arranged by LeRoy Collins, LULAC President Alfred Hernandez argued that perhaps Mexican Americans “should resort to marches, sit-ins, and demonstrations.” In October 1965, Congressman Ed Roybal, who represented East Los Angeles, told OEO that his constituents felt they were not getting “a square deal” from OEO and that the administration had a policy of “Negroes first.” He observed that perhaps Mexican Americans would “have to riot to get attention.” Roybal also predicted racial strife in Los Angeles within a year “unless something is done to indicate that the Mexican-American group is getting a good deal.” The message was not lost on OEO Director Sargent Shriver. On the memo informing him of Roybal’s complaints, Shriver wrote, “We should be doing much more with Mexican-Americans.”

Latino groups began to organize to combat the fact that blacks were receiving more War on Poverty funds than were Mexican Americans. These efforts were, for the most part, focused on inclusion and representation. Rudy Ramos, the GI Forum lead attorney, complained to the White House that the predominantly Mexican American community of East Los Angeles had lower incomes than the Watts area, yet it had received little War on Poverty funding. In September, a group of Latinos wired Shriver urging him to investigate the distribution of programs in Los Angeles. The writers of the telegram, who included representatives of MAPA, LULAC, the GI Forum, and the Community Service Organization, noted that the principal purpose of such an investigation would be “to instill in the Mexican-American community the belief that the Office of Economic Opportunity is really interested in their plight and will correct those inequities.” Another purpose of an investigation would be “to bring a halt to the rising bitter feelings of the Mexican-American in the streets that antipoverty funds and job opportunities are going principally to Negroes.” A 1965 study of Mexican Americans and politics reflected that bitterness.

The tensions between blacks and Latinos over the War on Poverty in Los Angeles reached new heights in October 1966, when Opal Jones, who in addition to being one of the founder’s of EOF was also the director of the Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency’s Neighborhood Adult Participation Project (NAPP), fired Gabriel Yáñez, the Latino director of a NAPP field office in East Los Angeles. Jones claimed Yáñez had told his aides not to
attend meetings called by her and had discouraged residents in his area from involvement in NAPP. Jones also claimed Yáñez was contributing to the split between Mexican Americans and African Americans both within NAPP and in Los Angeles at large.33

Yáñez’s firing infuriated many Latinos in Los Angeles. A number of Latinos picketed NAPP offices and criticized both NAPP and EYOA for showing favoritism toward blacks. Only three of NAPP’s fourteen outposts were located in predominantly Latino neighborhoods, while the remaining eleven rested in predominantly black residential areas. Jones eventually offered to divide the NAPP outposts more equally between black and Latino communities, but this angered black NAPP staff members. Eventually, under extreme pressure, she rehired Yáñez, but the damage had been done. Irene Tovar was the Latina director of the NAPP outpost in Pacoima. She resigned in protest over Yáñez’s firing and summed up the ethnic antagonisms and trouble that lay ahead for the War on Poverty in Los Angeles: “What’s good for Watts and the civil rights movement is not necessarily good for the Mexican-American community.”34

The NAPP controversy occurred at the beginning of the Chicano movement in Los Angeles as Mexican American political activism in relation to the War on Poverty shifted from inclusion and representation to self-determination and community control. In 1966, at the time of the NAPP controversy, a group of young Mexican Americans, inspired by the War on Poverty’s community action ideal, created the Young Citizens for Community Action (soon to become the Young Chicanos for Community Action, or YCCA). These young people’s experience in neighborhood and community improvement increased their awareness and pride of their ethnic identity and they began to create events focusing on Chicano culture, history, and politics. Led by David Sánchez, the group became the Brown Berets in 1968, emphasizing their shift to issues of group empowerment and cultural nationalism.35

Other evidence of the influence of the burgeoning Chicano movement included the establishment of an activist Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) office in Los Angeles. In addition, Latino students at various colleges and universities in Southern California formed student organizations such as the United Mexican American Students (UMAS), which organized and politicized young Latinos and led to student strikes or “blowouts” at several high schools in East Los Angeles in 1968. These walkouts were the first significant event of the Chicano movement in East Los Angeles. Two years later, and five years after Watts, in August 1970 Latino anti–Vietnam War demonstrators and police clashed in “the largest protest demonstration ever mounted by people of Mexican descent living in the United States.” Police killed three Mexican Americans, including Rubén Salazar, a reporter for the Los Angeles Times. The incident, combined with already growing student and community activism, led to increased pressure for self-determination and community control in the War on Poverty in Los Angeles.36
A CHICANO WAR ON POVERTY

The Chicano movement coincided with and informed Mexican American efforts for self-determination through the framework and programs of the War on Poverty. Mexican Americans, then, began to use the War on Poverty to develop organizations and institutions to benefit their community in East Los Angeles. Two of the key institutions created were the East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU), which focused on economic development, and the Chicana Action Service Center, which provided job placement for Mexican American women.

Founded in East Los Angeles in the early 1970s by Chicana feminists, the Chicana Action Service Center worked on placing Chicana women, particularly school dropouts and single mothers, in employment. The center brought established Chicana professionals to present job interview and career planning workshops to unemployed and undertrained Chicanas and “pioneered the development of placement networks with corporations and nonprofit agencies.” In addition to delivering services, the Chicana Action Service Center provided a sense of a Chicana cultural community in the business world for those it served. The Chicana Action Service Center clearly linked the burgeoning Chicano movement and the programs and community action strategy of the War on Poverty.

TELACU joined the self-determination ethos of the Chicano movement with the community focus of the War on Poverty and followed a similar community union model as the WLCAC. As Mexican Americans argued for more participation and representation in the War on Poverty, the UAW (prodded by one of its Mexican-American members, Glenn O’Loane, who worked at the same Ford assembly plant in Pico Rivera as Ted Watkins) determined to help create a similar organization to WLCAC in East Los Angeles. In February 1968, Mexican American activists and union leaders joined together to form the East Los Angeles Labor Community Action Committee. The organization advocated self-determination, community organization, and participation and economic development and would be incorporated officially as TELACU later in 1968. The organization was headed by Esteban Torres, a labor organizer from East Los Angeles who was able to establish trust quickly with the residents of the area. Torres saw his task as building “a community organization that could harness its own economic and social power.”

TELACU created its organization like a union organizes plants. Each of the twelve barrios in East Los Angeles served as a plant and each barrio/plant had a representative on TELACU’s board. One of TELACU’s first efforts at community organization succeeded in the creation of more than five hundred new public housing units. The effort was led by residents of the community determined to improve the housing in the area. In addition, TELACU actively participated in events connected to the Chicano movement, such as the anti-war rally in 1970 when Rubén Salazar was killed. TELACU staff members participated in, and helped plan, the march.
Reflecting the focus of the War on Poverty, TELACU’s first community programs were aimed at youth. They included a summer camp program under the cosponsorship of the WLCAC, Neighborhood Youth Corps programs, and a reading program for young children. In addition, TELACU developed job training programs for teenagers and young adults in concert with the UAW.41

TELACU also used its organization to develop Latino political power. In 1972, Torres established the Ad Hoc Committee to Incorporate East Los Angeles (ACTIELA) in an effort to fight the historic under representation of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles City and County government. The measure eventually went down to defeat in 1974 as the result of divisions within the Mexican American community and some residents’ fear of higher taxes. TELACU continued to actively pursue political power and representation for Latinos in Los Angeles and was vital to the growth of the Democratic Party in East Los Angeles and to growing electoral successes for Latino candidates for city, county, and statewide offices from the 1970s through the present.42

In addition to services, community organization, and political power, the TELACU board determined that for the community to survive and have influence, East Los Angeles needed to build a strong economic base. In fact, economic development became the cornerstone of TELACU’s holistic approach to community empowerment and self-determination. According to Torres, “for too long, external forces had taken capital out of East Los Angeles. It was owned by outsiders and it was controlled by outsiders. We felt it important to work from within to begin to recoup our own posture as an economic entity and to build capital. Out of that would come the political capital.” To control that capital, TELACU transformed abandoned buildings in East Los Angeles into thriving businesses. Perhaps its largest and most successful development has been its conversion of the vacant B.F. Goodrich tire manufacturing plant just off Interstate 5 into a thriving industrial park that employs more than two thousand residents of East Los Angeles. The organization’s connection to the Chicano movement is noticeable in the park’s main building, which includes a large mural depicting Mexican American history.43

In 1972, OEO designated TELACU a community development corporation (CDC). Congress, led by Senator Robert Kennedy, passed amendments to the Economic Opportunity Act in 1966 that led to the creation of CDCs. The CDC approach targeted low-income areas through a comprehensive approach that emphasized private enterprise and coordination of business, government, and neighborhood efforts. It was this comprehensive and coordinated CDC philosophy that guided TELACU’s approach and programs.44

TELACU faced criticism over the years for its focus on economic development and operating for-profit corporations. Some accused it of abandoning the community action/self-determination aspect of its original mandate. Indeed, one TELACU board member admitted that TELACU “did not want to become a large or mass membership organization, but rather we hoped to provide [economic] assistance to our neglected community.” David Lizzaraga, who has
served as TELACU’s president since 1974, argued that TELACU fulfilled its mandate through job creation and economic development and by serving as a catalyst for private sector reinvestment, but also noted that TELACU needs “to continue to be a catalyst in the community, and to continue be responsive to the community.”

CONCLUSION

The War on Poverty in Los Angeles evolved from a citywide, local-government-controlled effort to a community-based approach. The city’s official War on Poverty agency, EYOA, self-destructed as a result of issues of race, class, and political power and died in the late 1970s. Instead, the War on Poverty in Los Angeles continued through organizations like the WLCAC and TELACU, which community activists used in an effort to define their economic, cultural, and political freedom. Both agencies created the community union model of fighting poverty, yet their approaches varied to a certain extent. Both utilized a holistic strategy, but with different areas of emphasis. TELACU used more of a top-down approach and focused primarily on economic development and political and cultural power and at times relegated participation to a secondary goal. WLCAC, on the other hand, initially emphasized more community participation from “the bottom up, and the inside out, rather than from the top down and the outside in.” Over the years, though, WLCAC became a nonprofit corporation and, like TELACU, shifted toward economic development.

Both TELACU and WLCAC also changed in at least one other respect. They have broadened their base. With WLCAC, the change came as the result of an evolving population in Watts, which by 2000 was 50 percent Latino. Programs focusing on black cultural empowerment did not resonate as strongly with some of the newer residents of Watts. Thus, WLCAC began to incorporate programs celebrating Latino culture as well. TELACU, on the other hand, has broadened its base within the past ten years by reaching out to an ever-diversified Latino population in East Los Angeles and by expanding its economic development outside of East Los Angeles to areas such as San Antonio, Texas, and Washington, D.C.

WLCAC and TELACU have not solved the problem of poverty, but they have provided an important alternative approach. As both integrative yet community-based corporations, they have existed between government and business. In communities ten miles apart, with shared yet separate histories, the War on Poverty led to these community institutions, which arose out of movements for self-determination, cultural identity, and empowerment and became powerful symbols for their respective communities. As they maintained that cultural significance, they have also moved toward a more integrative, interracial, interethnic, and interregional yet still community-based attack against poverty. WLCAC and TELACU also represent how the shifting boundaries of
race shaped the development of the War on Poverty in Los Angeles and how the War on Poverty helped mold and alter those racial and cultural boundaries. They suggest that the multiracial character of the American West framed the contours of the War on Poverty in Los Angeles and that any discussions of the War on Poverty in the West must move beyond the black-white biracial paradigm. Finally, WLCAC and TELACU demonstrate that, while there may have been a connection to the civil rights movement in the policy’s origins, perhaps a more long-lasting and significant connection to social movements occurred during the implementation of the War on Poverty in communities focused on cultural and economic empowerment.

NOTES


22. Quoted in “Watts Union Workers Form Action Committee,” Los Angeles Sentinel, August 26, 1965, 4A.


37. Pycior, LBJ and Mexican Americans, 158-61, 208; Pitt and Pitt, Los Angeles A to Z, 130; and Vicki L. Ruiz, From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 114. This article does not address community organizations, such as the United Neighborhoods Organization (UNO), that were not directly connected to the framework or programs of the War on Poverty. The UNO was a joint venture of Catolicos Por La Raza (a group formed out of the Chicano movement) and the Catholic church in East Los Angeles. See Isidro D. Ortiz, “Chicano Urban Politics and the Politics of Reform in the Seventies,” Western Political Quarterly 37, no. 4 (December 1984): 564-77.

38. Quote is from Ruiz, From Out of the Shadows, 114. See also Acuña, Occupied America, 403.


41. Marín, Social Protest in an Urban Barrio, 174-75; and Chávez, Eastside Landmark, 35-37, 59-64.


43. “The East Los Angeles Community Union.”


45. The board member quote is from Marín, Social Protest in an Urban Barrio, 179. The Lizzaraga quote is from “The East Los Angeles Community Union.”

46. Quote is from UAW Report, quoted in Chávez, Eastside Landmark, 29.

47. Chávez, Eastside Landmark, 259-64.


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