

December 2020

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Recommended Citation

Kemet Imhotep & Bruce Corrie, *Dark Economics & Inspiring the Human Spirit to Transform It*, 14 U. ST. THOMAS J.L. & PUB. POL'Y 49 (2020).

Available at: <https://ir.stthomas.edu/ustjlpp/vol14/iss1/2>

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DARK ECONOMICS & INSPIRING THE HUMAN SPIRIT TO TRANSFORM IT

KEMET IMHOTEP & BRUCE CORRIE*

Kemet Imhotep begins the article and writes about his experience with Dark Economics – he is part of the millions called the working poor. He has lived in roach infested buildings and homeless shelters, working hard as a mechanic fixing apartments around the country. At the same time, he loves to reflect and write. He shares this experience and insights living in the world of Dark Economics – very much like the song Hotel California – you can come in but can never leave. But Kemet has come to the realization that he can come out of the Dark System. Hear him out...in the poetry of his thoughts and words.

I. DARK ECONOMICS – WE PAY TO BE POOR

The atmosphere az I am typing is so heavy.... Police killings of Black Men and Women have increased... Black on Black killings have been at the steady pace as planned. Dissatisfaction...iz at an all-time high... that haz not been seen in Decades. Poverty - Depression - Dark Despair- Health issues due to Stress...and a Breakdown of the Black family.... Have now all come together to dance. Death iz all around me..... The Corona Virus has us all.... Breaking down in micro-degrees. Somehow the 3 parts of the atom... wit' the nucleus makes it 4 parts. Are moving and operating in such a manner... we have never seen!

Az all thiz is going on around me... I have to take a deep breath... wipe my face... Stand up..... Wipe the dust off....

I must adapt.... And make moves right..?

* Kemet Imhotep is a reflective professional and entrepreneur and has served as a community editor for the Saint Paul Almanac. He continues to be involved in the St. Paul arts community. Bruce Corrie is an economist rooted in the ALANA (African Latino Asian and Native American) communities, and a professor at Concordia University St. Paul. They worked together in the 1990s producing a youth newspaper to capture the voices of youth “unplugged.” Kemet was a youth leader at Inner City Youth League and Bruce was a professor at Concordia University nearby, in Saint Paul, Minnesota. This article is inspired by their work together and a reflection on progress made these past two decades on the issues raised by the youth who wrote for the paper.

....” I was raised by all women, the men that were around had their own personal batttlez wit’ self. That was too intense... to give me any major advice or example of how to handle thiz... what iz called American Society. However, ... I had “ Pa-Pa” Rev. Silas Smith Sr. Who truly walked in the Way of Jesus Christ. There was Mr. Herman (A White Man) who was a carpenter... who inspired me to want to do Maintenance and Construction. There waz Mr. Beecham who is also a Brotha’ who has committed his life to walk and stand just like Jesus did... Mr. Beecham taught me to think ... non- emotional and wit a sense of Strategy, however 28 yearz later... now I understand and see these great men... in a different light. Now that I am facing thiz Dark Matter.

A. American Society

..... Az you are reading this... at thiz moment. Look at your ceiling Now look at your floor... well thiz system is right underneath your feet... just like when you are walking around a lake...and you pick up a rock... and when you do... you see a whole system. Living ... working and in full effect... deep huh?? Well that iz just like the system I’m expressing to you today. I am in a system.. That haz no walls.. Or structure.... However itz there ... some hear about it... some have never had to experience thiz un-admitted place or dark system. Thiz Dark System haz most of the people trapped in it.. Like 85% of the population.

B. A Dark System has to have Dark Economics-

Social Science typically defines Racial Inequality as- Imbalances in the distribution of Power, Economics, Resources, and Opportunities.

.... Ranging from disparities in wealth, poverty, Housing patterns, educational opportunities, unemployment rates, incarceration rates.

Current racial Inequalities in the (USA) have their roots in over 300 years of cultural, Economic, physical, legal and political discrimination based on race “ { Courtesy of Wikipedia } They left out... our Mental Health... just to survive being Black... in a system that waz not made for you at all... in no way... “

... The said above I had to learn the hard way wit’ no clue.. No rites of passage training on how to transition from a Boy to a Man... Right. ??

Now 27 Years and 9 Months of paying Child Support-- 65 to 55 percent of my take home gone, been homeless so many timez with 2-3 jobz I can’t

even keep count. Yearz of failed Ideas and major attempts to get out of poverty. My Mental.. Iz my Health... ??? Chest pains... and Anxiety.... Depression cloudz my ability to pray for the solution to an issue I didn't even know was there.

For yearz I felt like a failure in the eyes of my children and myself. What is this pressure I can not describe that iz attacking me from the inside out? Oh now I need Medication to help me wit' my Anxiety and Stress... I'm not sleeping.. I feel like that Hamster in the Wheel.

In conclusion....

Can I share wit you a long Story short... ? Well while I have you here....

Now that I am changing my thoughts to a higher frequency.. I have noticed that we pay to be poor in thiz Dark System. For the last month or so.. I have been trying to rent a Vehicle to travel back home and check on my children. Well I called all around and because I don't have a major credit card ... every corner and phone call... they treated me like I was asking them to let me get it for free.. And the hook up.

I stood in line at the Airport Budget Rental for 40 minz just to be told... No we don't' do debit cardz here. I was like... What??? O.K. I said to myself... he said... "Go to our store on Meridian... they take debit cards." I was like why did he say it like... I'm trying to pay him in food stamps? So, I travel down to the other location... wait for bout 25-20 mins.... then the employee says can I help you... in a tone like she already knew... she was gonna tell me "No". It wasn't a warm pleasant greeting I just saw her display... just a few minz before me. I was like.. " Yes.. I just was at the airport and they said to come here... to make a reservation for the 27th. She replied "When do you want to rent the car? The 27th of thiz month. Do you have a major credit card ?? Naw !! I have a debit card... she looked like... Really.. Well... I have to run your credit to see if you qualify for us to even be able to rent to you. **Stop right there**.... That for some reason those wordz..went inside my core... I took almost all day to get thiz reservation.... A whole hour went by... and they still gave me all thiz small talk..... She told me to call the main reservation line..... Now I'm getting really heated. On the phone with the main reservation Rep.. She was saying the same thing...and told me.. That they could not check to run my credit... unless I was renting today. I was like that makes no sense so I make a reservation... catch an uber with my bags to your location... the day I'm

scheduled to leave... you run my credit then there iz a chance I will not qualify to rent a car wit' budget.

They could not run my credit and let me know....Yes or No! After 30 more minz on the phone.. With no success... I step back inside the lobby of Budget Rental. Well I was so drained and mentally exhausted I was like thiz iz not that serious... just to rent a car... are you kidding me. The Employee looked me in my eyes.. And said.. “ If you had a major credit card... we would have been done.”

Everything stopped.... And I said... She's right. It'z not her fault .. I have not handled my business. It'z not her fault I have a low thought process....

... *we really pay to be poor*. All day... all that driving, calling, waiting, standing, explaining... for Nothing...

In This Dark System... we pay to be Poor.!!

Thank you for taking the time to listen....

II. TRANSFORMING DARK ECONOMICS

A. The Emperor Has No Clothes

When I came to Minnesota in the late 1980s, I would read the paper and note the way minorities were portrayed as criminals and welfare cheats. However, when I looked at the data, I found that they contributed significantly to the Minnesota economy as consumers, workers, entrepreneurs, cultural assets, taxpayers, and part of global networks that helped Minnesota's economy in many ways. Today for example, the ALANA (African Latino Asian and Native American) economy is larger than \$50 billion, which is larger than the economies of some countries – for example Cameroon or Bolivia¹. Yet the deficit mentality has prevailed.

Over the past two decades I have produced hundreds of “facts” documenting the economic contributions of the ALANA people in Minnesota. While the ALANA people proudly shared the data, I produced in their many circles, the rest of Minnesota was very silent about the data. They did not even quote the number in their speeches or messages to the community – even though I would send this data on ALANA economic

¹ Bruce Corrie, *ALANA Economic Contributions - \$60 Billion in Minnesota*, Empowering Strategies (July 25, 2020), <http://empoweringstrategies.org/alana-economic-contributions-60-billion-in-minnesota>.

contributions to them ahead of the meeting. Then it struck me that they lived in the world of Dark Economics. They had to show that the ALANA people were worthless, this gave them the basis to exploit them and deny them opportunities and access. Or, they could play the role of the liberator – but mainly with words and little action. They had very sophisticated researchers and statisticians in their universities and government departments who could produce these same statistics from the same governmental sources – but they just did not do it.

In my doctoral research I illustrated how complex forces and policy decisions ultimately take their toll on the lives of children in poverty.² There are serious consequences of our policy choices.

I had the incredible honor and opportunity to serve as the first ALANA director of the Department of Planning and Economic Development for the City of Saint Paul.³ During my tenure, top leadership changed from zero to 60 percent ALANA, important changes were made in the city's comprehensive plans and we saw our loans and grants reaching people with the least access. We opened our systems so that all had equal access to the opportunities we shared.⁴ Economic inclusion is possible – and I have data to prove that.⁵ I also got a glimpse into the world of Dark Economics – tentacles of power and influence took all kinds of colors and shapes and were embedded in institutions and structures.

B. Transforming Dark Economics

“Everything stopped.... And I said... She's right. It's not her fault .. I have not handled my business. It's not her fault I have a low thought process.... “

² Bruce Corrie, *Children in the Economic Development Process, a Vulnerable Group* (1987) (Ph.D thesis, University of Norte Dame).

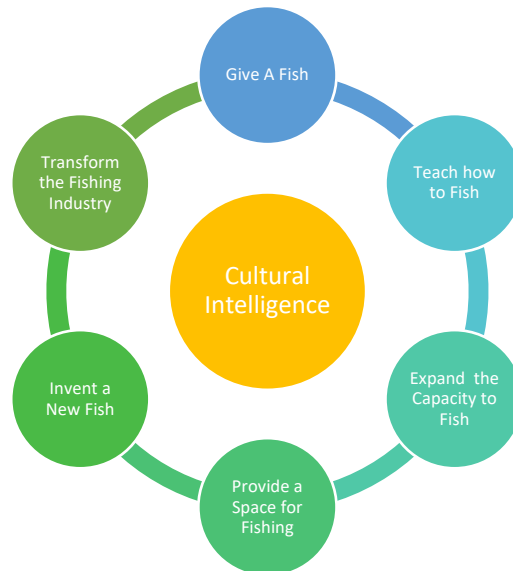
³ Bruce Corrie, *We Worked Together to Go Deeper and Help Make St. Paul Work for All*, PIONEER PRESS (Aug. 29, 2019), <https://www.twincities.com/2019/08/29/bruce-corrie-we-worked-to-go-deeper-and-help-make-st-paul-work-for-all>.

⁴ See *Racial Equity Metrics*, ST. PAUL DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, <https://www.stpaul.gov/departments/planning-economic-development/racial-equity-metrics> (last visited Oct. 15, 2020) (listing racial equity metrics for St. Paul and programs to alleviate disparities).

⁵ See Bruce Corrie, *The Minnesota Solution to Close the \$287 Billion Racial Economic Gap*, EMPOWERING STRATEGIES (October 21, 2020), <https://empoweringstrategies.org/the-minnesota-solution-to-close-the-287-billion-racial-economic-gaps/>.

Kemet has a deep insight – the answer has to come from within first – the spark that liberates the soul and inspires the spirit. He also discovered that he was not thinking like the “system.” If he had a good credit card, no one would ask him questions. If he had bad credit, he could repair it and get into the system. Now, inside the Dark System, the way to bring the light is to shine his own light. He stopped getting angry at people and found his inner peace. The challenges were real, but he approached them with strength. Just like a little soap kills the Corona Virus – the light of the human spirit will dispel the Dark System. In its place we can construct a system with humanity as its core.

We have to combine efforts at empowerment with wealth building in low income and ALANA communities. An effective wealth building strategy should offer a comprehensive portfolio of strategies – give people a fish, teach people how to fish, increase their capacity to fish, make sure there is a place for them to fish, and help them be creative and innovative to transform the fishing industry to be more productive. Each one of these strategies is needed for people at different levels of ability and experience in the economy.



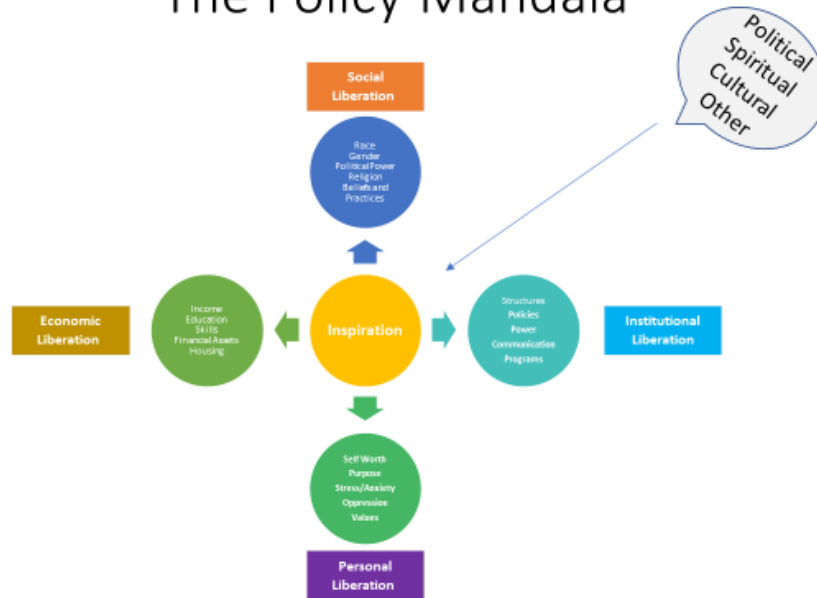
To dispel the Dark System, we need to ensure that we are working on a comprehensive strategy that integrates all four areas of empowerment – economic, social/political, personal, and institutional. This is illustrated in

the Policy Mandala (Mandala meaning wholeness).⁶ We need to build economic wealth and financial assets, and shared and accountable governance structures. We need to remove the social barriers of race, class, ability, and gender, transforming institutions to reflect shared governance and accountability. We also have to focus on the individual and how the individual can be inspired and empowered to access and utilize economic resources, social and political networks, and institutions that influence economic, political and social outcomes. The individual has to be inspired to take command of their destiny and shape their own pathway to progress. Strong sources for that inspiration are in their own cultural traditions and values. The individual will achieve material progress as well as human liberation in the various dimensions – personal, economic, institutional, and social/political.

For example, there is a workforce program that can hire the individual so that they can get a job with higher pay. The individual needs to first understand the life situation they are in – what caused them to be in that situation, what is blocking their progress, and how the new job will help them move to the next level. The individual needs to discover their own source of strength and cultural roots. Out of this will come the inspiration to move forward with confidence. They need to understand that the new workplace might not be prepared to serve them in a meaningful way because of barriers such as institutional racism. So, the individual has to be prepared and connected to strong emotional and political support systems that can help with institutional change. This means being aware of social and political power networks and how to engage with them.

⁶ Bruce Corrie, *A Policy Framework for Economic and Social Liberation: The Policy Mandala*, 43 REV. OF BLACK POL. ECON., no. 2, Jan. 2016, at 101.

The Policy Mandala



From the perspective of the institution offering the job program, they need to assess if they are ready for someone with a different cultural and work experience. The institution needs to evaluate its own biases and structures that prevent people outside the institutional network from progressing in their career. Support mechanisms need to be in place.

Existing poverty programs have failed because they offered a program but not a pathway that ensured success. They assumed the individual entering the program was just like them and failed to incorporate and integrate the experience of racism on pathways to success. As such, the program was destined to fail.

Inspiration of the human spirit has to integrate political, cultural, spiritual and human elements to be successful. Gandhi's inspiration was rooted in Indian cultural tradition, was aware of political power structures of Colonialism, and was rooted in the life of rural India. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s strategy was rooted in African American spirituality and cultural traditions and was aware of political and institutional structures around racism. Nelson Mandela's strategy involved engaging with the oppressor in a way that both parties come out whole. Paulo Freire illustrated the

importance of personal liberation from the oppressor deeply rooted in the psyche of the oppressed.⁷ Mother Teresa showed the pathway of unconditional love. These leaders integrated all these elements and so had a powerful impact on individuals, inspiring them to march into situations of great personal risk with determined self-confidence. Each one of these giants have inspired my thinking on effective empowering strategies to dispel the Dark Economics that has dominated our lives.

Kemet reached the same conclusion working hard to make ends meet and finding that moment to reflect. *Dark Economics adds enormous burdens on the poor - We pay to be poor! Its time for a system reboot.*

⁷ See e.g. Paulo Freire, PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED (1970).