

A Review of

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***WHAT A MIGHTY POWER WE CAN BE: AFRICAN AMERICAN FRATERNAL GROUPS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL EQUALITY***

Theда Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006)

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Books such as Robert Putnam's 2000 *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, have provided new impetus for scholarship regarding the involvement of Americans in voluntary social and civic associational pursuits. These studies are providing significant new observations regarding contemporary activities as widely-ranging as political advocacy groups, church committees or fan clubs for popular television programs. Overlooked in this revival of interest in Americans' associational activities has been involvement in historically important 'fraternal societies' such as the Freemasons, perhaps because, as the authors observe, they are "viewed as odd relics of the past" (9). It is important to recall, however, that these groups were tremendously popular at one time. For instance, Albert Stevens' 1900 *Cyclopedia of Fraternities* suggested that more than 40% of the male population over 21 — some six million persons — belonged to such groups.

Beginning from ideas and information gleaned through Harvard's impressive Civic Engagement Project, which sought to trace the involvement of Americans in voluntary organizations from 1790 to the present, renowned Harvard University sociologist and political scientist, Theda Skocpol, working with Marshall Ganz, a public policy lecturer at the Kennedy School and Harvard (perhaps notable most recently for his involvement as a strategist with the Obama campaign), as well as several graduate students, have created a highly intriguing body of scholarship on African American involvement in fraternal groups during the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries.

*What a Mighty Power We Can Be* brings together work from a variety of scholarly fields: African American history, voluntary groups, demographics, political advocacy, and the twentieth-century civil rights movement. Working from incomplete historical records, the study provides interesting projections regarding levels of participation in fraternal activity by African Americans during the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, as well as a tremendously useful survey of some of the leading fraternal organizations created by African Americans. (As a point of clarification, in this usage 'fraternal groups' are commonly understood as organizations created by self-selecting members, organized into local units but associated with a wider, often national or international body, that band together to pursue common aims such as mutual protection, and inculcation of values, often using 'secret' rituals that can be used to identify genuine adherents from posers or interlopers. Some of these groups limited participation on the basis of gender, while others were gender-integrated.)

Providing proof for the argument that fraternal organizations played a critical role in African American communities, the book surveys some of the most important fraternal societies. The second chapter attempts to establish some of the basic characteristics of leading organizations in the US fraternal universe, identifying and describing fraternal societies that existed parallel to 'white' fraternals, as well as those groups that African Americans created for themselves. Groups examined include (but are not

limited to) the Prince Hall Masons, the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, the Coloured Knights of Pythias, the Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World, the Independent Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria, the Grand United Order of Galilean Fisherman, and the United Brothers of Friendship and the Sisters of the Mysterious Ten. As this study indicates, however, information on the membership history and resources of many of these groups is often partial, and was sometimes created by hostile parties. Research sources ranged from obvious documentary records, such as newspapers, through to unique material evidence found via sources such as Ebay, including ephemera produced by the associations themselves.

Upon its solidly supported proposition that fraternal groups were clearly popular among African Americans, *What a Mighty Power We Can Be* argues that fraternal groups were important training grounds for civic engagement, citizenship training, and general education, and that some of the groups that survived into the post-World War II era went on to play important roles in the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Perhaps the most intriguing chapter of the book concerns the battles African American fraternal groups fought during the early-twentieth-century over whether they had the right to use names, symbols, and identities associated with similar 'white' organizations. These struggles, the text suggests, allowed African Americans to develop strategies for appealing state decisions that violated their legal rights to federal courts, for soliciting financial support for such cases from their memberships, and eventually, identifying and advancing 'test cases' that these groups felt they had a good chance of winning.

The lessons from these battles served African American fraternal groups well in the post-World War Two era, when African Americans would undertake significant, and unprecedented civil rights activism. A chapter investigates how African American fraternal organizations such as the Prince Hall Masons and Elks undertook multiple strategies of creating social change in the post-World War Two era, including providing financial support for organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured Peoples, introducing education programs for their own members and outsiders that embraced diverse needs ranging from literacy to understanding of governance and the law, as well as providing advice to their membership regarding legislation and electoral candidates that should be supported or opposed.

*What Mighty Power We Can Be* is, undoubtedly, an impressive and tremendously useful piece of scholarship. As a survey that attempts to identify general trends among fraternal membership and the activities that these groups involved themselves in there are interesting areas of research that are not covered. There is little evidence provided as to why individual members might have joined these groups, which might have lent support for (or undermined) the arguments made regarding the importance of these groups to African American communities. Additionally, it is a shame that more illustrations are not provided of the unique material resources used in this study, such as lodge pins and ribbons. Another shortcoming is that the text does not offer much comparative context regarding what role fraternal organizations played for 'whites' or other non-African Americans. If these organizations also acted as bases for inculcating certain civic values and practices, then the truly unique attribute of African American fraternalism is really how these skills were then applied.

Finally, reading this text not long after the election of the first African American US President, and knowing Ganz's involvement in Obama's campaign, made for some thought-provoking questions. The Obama camp's strategy of 'from the ground up' organization, with its empowerment of local community

organizers, poses an interesting parallel to the arguments contained in *What A Mighty Power We Can Be* regarding the strengths offered by nationally-organized but community-based groups. As fraternal groups have declined in popularity over the last thirty or forty years, perhaps Ganz's advice for the Obama campaign was essentially to create its own type of school for activism based loosely on the attributes of the African American fraternal experience of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries.