

Book Reviews

Urban Affairs Review

45(4) 563–578

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God and Government in the Ghetto: The Politics of Church–State Collaboration in Black America, by Michael Leo Owens. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 304 pp. \$55.00 (cloth); \$22.00 (paper).

DOI: 10.1177/1078087408330221

Increasingly, scholarship has become occupied with the role of the post–civil rights Black church in public life. A major concern is how Black churches address (or fail to address) the persistent racial inequalities left unsolved in the post–civil rights era—especially the persistent problems of the inner city, such as concentrated poverty, high rates of unemployment, lack of affordable housing, violence, and the overall precarious situation of Black life in the so-called ghetto. Most of the recent contributions about the public life of the Black church focus on their role in electoral politics and movement politics. In *God and Government in the Ghetto*, Michael Leo Owens takes a rather unique and refreshing approach to studying Black churches in public life. He examines how Black churches collaborate with local governments to distribute in his words “the spoils of politics” (p. 84). His central argument is that in struggling Black neighborhoods, activist Black churches are increasingly participating in collaborative community development and revitalization projects with local government. This collaboration is political engagement because activist clergy who collaborate with government are not simply acting as the state’s agents. They are attempting to influence public policy on the behalf of their communities through what Owens calls “bureaucratic enfranchisement” (p. 172).

Owens uses a mixed methodological approach in his study, and the bulk of the empirical data comes from field research in four neighborhoods in four different boroughs in New York City: Central Harlem in Manhattan, Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, Morrisania in the Bronx, and South Jamaica in Queens. He uses interviews, survey research, and document analysis. The result is a rich collection of data through which Owens explores the intricacies of Black church–state collaborations in these neighborhoods. He examines these collaborative projects and why activist Black churches choose to collaborate with government (and the considerations they take into account). He also explores the consequences of this collaboration.

The book is divided into three parts. In part 1, Owens develops a theory about Black church–state collaboration. He explores the history of Black church–state collaboration and reveals that although it is not a new phenomenon, it has become an increasingly popular form of political engagement among a select group of activist Black churches. He goes on to explain why churches would choose to collaborate with government and argues that they are motivated by political, professional, and programmatic goals. In addition to these motives, changes in public policy, such as welfare reform and faith-based initiatives, encourage churches to engage in collaboration with government. Many of these activist Black churches develop community development corporations (CDCs) to build their capacity to collaborate successfully.

In the second part, Owens moves from the theoretical to his empirical contributions. He explains the social and political context of his field research in New York City from the 1960s to the present. Despite the increased number of Black elected officials and the election of a Black mayor, the neighborhoods in this study did not see measurable improvements. Select activist churches, such as Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem and Allen AME Church in Queens, addressed this by engaging in community development, which they considered “faith in action,” (p. 86) primarily via CDCs.

In part 3, Owens explores the collaborative projects between the city of New York and Black church–associated CDCs to develop affordable housing. Black church–associated CDCs became “conduits of ‘substantive’ resources from the larger external community” (p. 155) to the neighborhoods in this study. These churches delivered public properties for redevelopment into affordable housing, public funding to assist in this redevelopment, and public powers to administer the development projects. Owens found that the church-affiliated CDCs even engaged in activities beyond church–state collaboration but that their political engagement beyond collaboration was constrained and, in some respects, led to political demobilization. Ultimately, Black church–New York City collaborations led to physical improvements in these neighborhoods in that there were fewer abandoned and blighted buildings. However, indicators such as the poverty rate and median family income show that the socioeconomic improvements were only marginal and that “collaboration with government alone is inadequate to fully resurrect impoverished Black neighborhoods in New York City” (p. 171).

This book contributes to the neglected scholarship about the political role of activist Black churches in three very important and distinctive respects. First of all, Owens’s book is profound in the attention it pays to Black church political engagement beyond electoral and protest politics. He correctly notes that there is much to know about the Black church “after voters cast their ballots” and “after protests die down” (p. 6). Second, Owens focuses on

the local level of politics, which is also often neglected by scholars of the Black church and politics. Third, this analysis lends very important insight into questions of minority political incorporation. Besides electoral politics, Owens points out ways that low-income Black communities may leverage to get a more effective government response. By engaging in collaborative projects with government, activist Black churches have been able to direct the distribution of government resources to the benefit of low-income Black communities.

God and Government in the Ghetto is truly on the cutting edge of Black church and politics scholarship. It is a fresh approach. It is theoretically rich, methodologically balanced, and a must-read for anyone who studies the Black church and public life, minority political incorporation in American cities, or Black politics generally.

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Political Monopolies in American Cities: The Rise and Fall of Bosses and Reformers, by Jessica Trounstein. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 296 pp. \$60 (cloth); \$22 (paper).

DOI: 10.1177/1078087409332301

Ambitious forays into urban political inquiry, particularly those that attempt to juxtapose historical narratives of political developments against quantitative analytic lenses, are rare indeed. While this hallmark alone makes *Political Monopolies* worthy of wide readership, Trounstein's work has much more to contribute to our understanding of the history of our cities.

The principal arguments of the book are fairly straightforward: that political machines and reform regimes were different forms of a single phenomenon (the drive to secure political control over elections and policy outputs), that each form tried to bias the system in favor of incumbents, and that the governing systems put in place had some role to play in their respective demises. Both machines and reform regimes tailored their dominating strategies to their demographic and political environments. For example, whereas in cities with relatively larger numbers of working-class denizens, governing coalitions used patronage to monopolize politics, cities with less income inequality and smaller minority populations saw greater use of suffrage restrictions and vote dilution measures for the same ends—to retain