

Johann N. Neem

What a Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality, by Theda Skocpol, Ariana Liazos, and Marshall Ganz. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006. 310 pp. \$27.95.

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Theda Skocpol, Ariana Liazos, and Marshall Ganz have written a remarkable book on the implications of African American fraternalism for American democracy. They argue that African American fraternal associations, often overlooked in studies of American political development and history, played a vital role in developing civic capacities among African Americans and, in turn, provided one of the most important institutional roots for the civil rights movement of the 1950s.

The book begins with a panorama of African American fraternalism, opening a window into a part of America's past that is hardly known. The authors have parsed varied historical evidence, especially local city directories, to recover every chapter of a translocal African American fraternal association they could find. Their findings make clear that African American fraternal associations had national reach and deep roots in many communities. The prevalence of African American fraternal associations meant that many African American men and, in mixed-gender and female associations, women had "extraordinary opportunities to acquire and exercise organizational skills" (p. 61). Such fraternal associations as the Prince Hall Masons, the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, the Knights of Pythias, and the Improved and Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World (IBPO of E) offered African Americans opportunities for self-government denied them in the formal, segregated life of the American polity. Because fraternal associations bridged class and occupational lines, they provided sites for civic participation and coalition building throughout the African American community. Following Robert Putnam's (2000) classification of bridging versus bonding social capital, the authors argue that despite being products of bonding social capital—meaning a product of the segregating efforts of White fraternal associations—within the African American community fraternal associations acted as bridging social capital (p. 87).

It is in relation to civil rights that the authors' argument is most important. Scholars usually trace the origins of the midcentury civil rights movements to two institutions, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and African American churches. Discounting neither, the authors make a compelling case that African American fraternal associations are an equally important institutional root. Like the NAACP, African American fraternal associations in the early 20th century developed legal strategies to promote civil rights. Faced with White associations' efforts to shut down parallel Black associations (White Pythians and Shriners, for example), African American associations went to court to defend their right to organize. In doing so they joined with the NAACP to train a new cadre of lawyers to use test

cases to further civil rights and helped teach lawyers to use the federal court system to further a civil rights agenda. And they were quite successful. Here, the authors might have placed these cases in the context of then-raging battles over the freedom to associate, spurred by anti-Ku Klux Klan and anti-Communist party laws, and culminating in the U.S. Supreme Court's articulation of a federal right to associate in *NAACP v. Alabama* (1958). Nonetheless the authors demonstrate that African American fraternal associations' efforts to protect their organizations helped create legal networks capable of using federal courts to protect African Americans' rights.

The final part of the book focuses on the role of African American fraternal associations in the civil rights movement, based largely on the case of the IBP of E. The largest African American fraternal association, the Elks were vital to the civil rights movement's success. First, by serving as a school for self-government, Elks taught many African Americans basic citizenship skills. But, the authors argue, the Elks went further. Through their Education and Civil Liberties departments, the latter established in 1927, they reached out to members and the broader community to inform them of their constitutional rights and to teach strategies to achieve them. Second, the solidarity fostered among members aided the organization's sustained efforts on behalf of racial justice. Third, Elks and other fraternal associations acted as "interorganizational brokers," developing ties to and supporting other organizations. The Elks, for example, provided sustained economic support to the NAACP and used their publications to promote that organization's work. Finally, Elks and other fraternal associations' federated structure combined national coordination—including pressuring national political leaders—with local outlets for civic action. Would the work of the NAACP and of Martin Luther King have been as successful if ordinary African Americans had not developed their commitment to civil rights and the necessary civic skills through participation in fraternal associations? The authors make a strong case that the answer is *no*.

To understand how important African American fraternalism was to the civil rights movement, the authors close with a discussion of "Crisis and Commitment," which appeared in the October 14, 1966, *New York Times*. Published when some African Americans were advocating and committing violence through rioting, and as White Americans turned away from the civil rights cause, moderate African American leaders urged a middle ground. Denouncing violence, they reminded all Americans that much more needed to be done before African Americans could become truly equal. The statement was signed by seven African American leaders. The first five signatories represented, not surprisingly, well-known civil rights organizations: the National Council of Negro Women, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the NAACP, and the National Urban League. The last two, however, were the Executive Secretary of the Conference of Grand Masters, Prince Hall Masons of America, and the Grand Exalted Ruler of the IBPO of E. Forgotten now, but thanks to the authors remembered again, Black fraternal associations were clearly seen as central to the civil rights movement.

The authors conclude that the history of African American fraternalism has implications for American democracy. First, it proves that despite poverty and segregation, African Americans were not prevented “from elaborating ‘social capital’ in their churches and fraternal associations” (p. 221). Second, “out of separate institution-building in fraternal lodges (as well as in churches), African Americans built the collective will and capacity to contribute to the remaking of U.S. democracy on behalf of all its citizens, regardless of race, creed, gender, or origin” (p. 227). African American fraternal associations not only helped generate the social capital necessary for the civil rights movement, but in doing so furthered the noblest ideals of American democracy.

This book should be read by any student interested in the role of voluntary associations in shaping the civic capacities of ordinary citizens. Its lessons extend well beyond African Americans to a broader understanding of how and why joining membership associations enable citizens to become active participants in democratic self-government. The authors reinforce Alexis de Tocqueville’s (2004) claim in *Democracy in America* that “in democratic countries, the science of association is the fundamental science.” The authors also reinforce Theda Skocpol’s (2003) argument in *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*. Many nonprofit advocacy groups today are professional lobbying organizations that rely on members for little more than dues. Although they certainly continue to promote civic education, do they still provide the civic skills that are so vital to democratic self-government? If not, at what cost?

References

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Johann N. Neem, assistant professor of history at Western Washington University, is author of *Creating a Nation of Joiners: Democracy and Civil Society in Early National Massachusetts* (Harvard University Press, forthcoming 2008).

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Kieran Healy’s *Last Best Gifts: Altruism and the Market for Human Blood and Organs* is the latest in a long line of books that can be traced to Marcel Mauss’s *The*