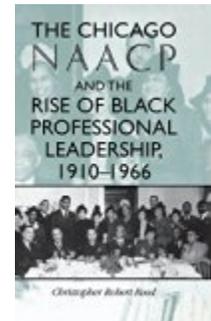


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher Robert Reed. *The Chicago NAACP and the Rise of Black Professional Leadership, 1910-1966*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. 276 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33313-1.

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THE CHICAGO NAACP

The nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, has yet to receive a full-scale monograph treatment. Instead, scholars have written on different phases of the history of the organization, particularly the significant campaigns it has carried out, or have done work on its larger chapters and branches. Additionally, the traditional historiography of the NAACP by and large describes its interracial (but largely with neo-abolitionist) origins in the Progressive Era, and the fight by a growing and more assertive African-American middle and professional class to take over the reins of the organization (particularly in the running of the day-to-day affairs of the organization, in its membership recruitment, and in its branch development in the 1930s and 1940s). This tradition also maintains that the NAACP is a middle-class organization run by and for the middle class. Hence its greatest achievements, from "don't buy where you can't work" campaigns of the 1930s, to the "Double V" campaigns of the 1940s, to the Brown victory and even ultimately the 1964 Civil Rights Act, are now seen by historians as essentially campaigns that benefited the middle and not the working class.

This new study by Christopher Robert Reed, Professor of History and Director of the St. Clair Drake Center for African and African-American Studies at Roosevelt University, lies partly within this historiographical tradition. But Reed, in his discussion of the Chicago branch of the NAACP, marks a new and extremely interesting departure by asserting that the Chicago branch did not fol-

low that rigidly hierarchical pattern. He believes that increasingly into the late 1930s and certainly by the 1940s, the Chicago Branch had clearly established "democracy" within its ranks. This was a new departure for a NAACP branch. The National office, the conferences, branches, and chapters within the NAACP were designed not to be "democratic," but to be run top-down, with the leadership cadre providing the direction for the organization and the masses following that lead. Reed makes the case, and supports it with copious examples, that in Chicago the leadership and membership often went outside the established procedures in an attempt to ensure that African-Americans in Chicago got racial and, very importantly, economic justice. Indeed, this insistence by the Chicago branch on economic justice in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (before the War on Poverty) really marks it as a visionary enterprise. Activities to assure economic justice meant that the Chicago branch, unlike many other branches and chapters around the country, was always able to attract and to keep members of the working class. Certainly, this insistence on economic as well as racial justice did cause internal schism at times, but Reed is convincing in asserting that the inclusiveness of the Chicago Branch was its real strength.

Currently, the NAACP is going through another period of rethinking and re-strategizing as it attempts to tackle the problems facing African Americans on the eve of the twenty-first century. I would recommend that the NAACP leadership read Reed's exceedingly provocative study and learn its lessons. To be successful, the NAACP

needs everyone's support, and Reed demonstrates how it is possible to achieve this. I would also recommend this book to urban historians, historians of African-America, Civil Rights historians, and anyone interested in learning how to wage a progressive struggle during hard times.

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