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The Evolution of African American Grassroots Activism in Postwar Pittsburgh

In *Race and Renaissance*, Joe W. Trotter and Jared N. Day dissect the multilayered political, social, and economic struggles that have confronted and consumed Pittsburgh's African American community since the Second World War. They weave together the historical and the contemporary to create a dynamic tapestry about class inequity and racial injustice in Pittsburgh's postindustrial atmosphere. Bridging the past and present is a fundamentally important goal in their tome, as they believe that "Pittsburgh provides an exceedingly important example of a place in which historical scholarship bears on issues of contemporary social change" (p. xviiii). Pittsburgh is especially important, they argue, because, more than any other city in the United States, it incorporated industrial capitalism into its economy, with its central role as the nation's steel producer–and thus had an enormous stake in responding to the decline of industry from the 1950s on. It was within this framework that black Pittsburghers initiated and participated in grassroots campaigns to combat the catastrophic effects of deindustrialization, residential discrimination, and urban redevelopment in their embattled neighborhoods in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Trotter and Day's portrayal of Pittsburgh parallels recent historical studies about grassroots activism in African American and minority communities during urban America's postindustrial phase. They examine the interplay between structural change in postwar Pittsburgh triggered by deindustrialization; the creation of government programs, such as urban renewal, to counter the effects of these shifting forces; and the African American community's effort to vanquish racial and economic injustice caused or aggravated by these forces. In telling this tale, they underscore the importance of black community engagement in Pittsburgh during the national civil rights and desegregation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, and repudiate the despondent tone in the "urban crisis" literature concerning the social and economic prospects for African Americans. They emphasize the complexities of African American community development in an "evolving global economy," finding that "a process of community rebuilding proceeded alongside a destructive process of global social change" in Pittsburgh's black neighborhoods (pp. xviii, xxi).

Having a rich and deep historical presence in the Steel City, Pittsburgh's African Americans first developed community strategies to confront racial encumbrances and economic disparities in the early twentieth century. Although labor openings in the steel industry drew southern blacks to Pittsburgh during the First World War, many of these migrants still endured constant layoffs and racial discrimination in the city's manufacturing sector. Community organizations, such as the Urban League of Pittsburgh, assisted black migrants in finding work, fighting discriminatory labor practices, and adjusting to "life in the industrial city" (p. 23). As residential and institutional segregation spread throughout the city's schools, parks, and workplaces, Pittsburgh's Hill District quickly became the religious, cultural, and business epicenter of African American life and accentuated feelings of race pride among its inhabitants from the 1920s through the 1940s.

Trotter and Day note that black residents proactively responded to the structural realignments within Pittsburgh's industrial and housing sectors following World War II by developing community initiatives and political entities to protect and ensure their economic, housing, and political rights. Renaissance I, a controversial urban renewal program implemented in 1943, displaced countless working-class African American families, and forced them to relocate to segregated housing projects, and, in some instances, all-white neighborhoods, where interracial violence erupted. In 1958, African American activists, with the assistance of the National Association

for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), successfully convinced Mayor David Lawrence and the Pittsburgh city government to pass a fair housing ordinance, which banned racial discrimination in Pittsburgh's housing market. Although it did not put an end to discrimination, the new ordinance led to a "landmark decision" in the U.S. district court, ordering a metropolitan Pittsburgh listing service to enroll a black broker (p. 102). This and other successes stemming from the legislation unequivocally emboldened African American residents to petition the mayor's Human Relations Commission about ongoing discriminatory practices in the Pittsburgh housing market. Dissatisfaction with the pace and type of changes, however, meant that, by the end of the 1960s, the Black Power movement "emerged at the center of Pittsburgh's African American freedom struggle" (p. 108). Staging protest marches against employment discrimination in the building trades in the late 1960s, the Black Construction Coalition, a fruit of the Black Power movement, secured passage of the Pittsburgh Plan, which afforded African Americans new hiring and training opportunities in the construction and building industries.

In the 1970s, Pittsburgh's industrial decline and shrinking population inspired its political and economic leaders to launch Renaissance II, a public-private joint venture designed to attract technology- and service-based firms to downtown Pittsburgh. The Steel City's adoption of Renaissance II signaled a significant move away from its steelmaking identity, establishing the financial and technological conditions that contributed to Pittsburgh's economic resurgence by the 1980s. Pittsburgh's resulting economic transformation, however, adversely affected African American social and economic fortunes. As middle-class whites and blacks increasingly moved to the suburbs and to Sun Belt cities in the wake of deindustrialization, many working-class blacks found themselves trapped in Pittsburgh's highly segregated job and housing markets and education system.

Responding to these structural and more immediate obstacles, black residents channeled their individual energies to forge community campaigns dedicated to business growth, improved housing conditions, and grassroots political involvement. Prominent community figures, like Harvey Adams, a noted NAACP member, established coalitions with local churches, developed social justice networks, and promoted black job growth during Renaissance II. The Affirmative Action Fair Share Strategy 21 Coalition established a working relationship with local Catholic institutions to guarantee black residents access to real estate and employment opportunities. Trotter and Day observe that, despite the structural and other impediments, the city's African American community successfully "created their own, more hopeful, and even more forward-looking black renaissance" (p. 198).

Trotter and Day broaden our intellectual understanding of African American life in Pittsburgh by employing an interdisciplinary approach, which further illuminates their discussion of race, class, and gender inequities in the Steel City. They nicely blend sociological analyses, urban studies, and oral histories to create a stimulating portrait of African American community activism in an ever-changing postindustrial environment. They also successfully examine the internal class and gender divisions that still plague Pittsburgh's African American community, combining testimony from black residents and evidence from public policy studies to explain why these intra-racial divides persist. Their appendix, which includes detailed federal statistics and census data, clearly charts the severe historic and contemporary occupational imbalances between white and black Pittsburgh residents.

Trotter and Day also deftly detail black Pittsburghers' acrimonious relationship with the "liberal" state and its white-oriented policies. Although the authors refrain from explicitly critiquing "postwar liberalism" as other scholars, such as Robert Self (*American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* [2003]), have done, they make it clear that state and local government bodies, such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority, subverted genuine economic, social, and racial progress in Pittsburgh's black community by practicing racial discrimination and residential segregation. They convincingly argue that the failure of Pittsburgh's government apparatus to stem this decline, and its culpability for the persistence of economic and civic inequality, spurred black Pittsburghers to enlist in the northern civil rights struggle, and publicly expose the contradictions within the city government's grand revitalization schemes. They persuasively contend that black Pittsburghers withstood the state's innumerable follies and became active social and political agents, for "African Americans stayed within the city and worked to create their own renaissance to counteract some of the destructive impacts of Pittsburgh's predominantly white urban revival" (p. xxi).

Trotter and Day's grassroots paradigm in their study of Pittsburgh's post-World War II African American community complements recent studies of other postindustrial, minority, urban enclaves, and the various ways minority groups in those communities responded to

deindustrialization and racial discrimination in America's major cities in the late twentieth century.[1] They also explore, through nicely situated examples, the unique contours of grassroots activism and deindustrialization within the context of Pittsburgh city politics. For example, they provide an insightful and enlightening discussion of Pittsburgh's electoral politics during the late 1980s, and the role African American community organizations, such as the Metropolitan Pittsburgh Crusade for Voters (and local politicians), played in overhauling the racial disparities within Pittsburgh's governing structure (as well as launching "Pittsburgh Works," a grassroots initiative aimed at securing employment for minorities and women in Pittsburgh's postindustrial climate in 1987).

In providing us with this lucid history of Pittsburgh's African American community, Trotter and Day shed new light on how past actions inform present conditions in the Steel City's black neighborhoods. Their case study, the first of its kind on postwar Pittsburgh, will prove especially useful to urban historians seeking new ways to understand African Americans' changing roles and responses in the face of the structural reordering of postwar urban America.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Mathew Whitaker, *Race Work: The Rise of Civil Rights in the Urban West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Rhonda Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

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