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Jacqueline M. Moore. *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1999. 304 pp. $37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1903-4.

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The period from the end of Reconstruction through World War I has been notorious as the "nadir" of black history in the United States. It was a time of intense racial oppression characterized by legal discrimination and extra-legal terrorism. Yet recent scholarship has put to rest any notion that this quelled African American activism or dismantled black social structures. To the contrary, historians have shown how African Americans continued creating institutions and cultivating communities–perhaps responding even more creatively because of the severity of their oppression. Jacqueline M. Moore's *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* contributes to this reevaluation of the Jim Crow era by examining the social, institutional, and political lives of some of Washington's most illustrious black residents.[1]

Moore argues that from 1880 to 1920, Washington's elite African Americans adopted several distinct approaches to racial identity and political activism. In the immediate aftermath of Reconstruction, Moore asserts, black elites had "faith that the race would ultimately be assimilated into white society" (p. 5). The black elite therefore had little interest in race-based activism, instead seeking "to distinguish itself from the black masses so as to retain its superior social status in the community at large" (p. 5). Black elites could not sustain this haughty attitude in the face of increasing segregation and racism, however. Beginning in the 1890s, they "reluctantly adopted the rhetoric of racial solidarity" and began to create "institutions that united the black community and strengthened its independence" (p. 6). Washington's African American elites now undertook "nonconfrontational" forms of activism and advocacy for the race, often as members of Booker T. Washington's powerful patronage network.

Contrary to scholars who attribute early twentieth-century civil rights activism to the emergence of an upstart professional class that replaced the "aristocratic" leaders of the nineteenth century, Moore argues that members of the traditional elite refashioned their attitudes and tactics to meet changing "objective conditions."[2] In the 1910s, Woodrow Wilson inflicted official segregation on the national capital, the Tuskegee machine disintegrated, and black soldiers fought in the Great War. Responding to these new developments, the District's black elite enthusiastically embraced the aggressive civil rights activism of the early NAACP.

Moore's examination of elite African Americans' lives in the District is extensive, particularly for the period between 1890 and 1910. Compared with Willard Gatewood's *Aristocrats of Color*, a nationwide study of the black elite that treats many of the same actors, *Leading the Race* looks more carefully at elites' local institutional networks and affiliations: families, social circles, employment in the public schools and at Howard University, and participation in voluntary associations.[3] Moore explores the work lives of professional African American men (particularly lawyers, doctors, and dentists), though she has less to say about elite women's paid employment, focusing instead on their philanthropic activities.

Especially interesting is Moore's assessment, found mostly in chapters five and six, of the influence of Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee machine on Washington, D.C. institutions during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909). Booker T. Washington's connections with the federal government carried considerable weight in local affairs, since federal appointments were plentiful in the District and the President and Congress had considerable control over local institutions. Once Tuskegee allies obtained official positions in the District's black public schools and at Howard, however, they faced constant challenges by local white leaders who opposed black control. At the same time, many members of the District's black elite opposed the "industrial" curriculum advocated by Tuskegee supporters and favored, instead, liberal arts education for black students. Moore argues that the ensuing three-way struggles for control–involving local white leaders, black Tuskegee supporters,

and black opponents of Tuskegee–reflected a black leadership class beleaguered by racism and internally divided over serious philosophical questions.

Moore is on firm ground in arguing that the broken promises of Reconstruction and the rise of new forms of racism helped produce a class of radicalized professionals. Her suggestions about the disillusionment of African American professionals have fascinating implications for our understanding of the middle-class aspects of civil rights activism, both its promises and limitations. Yet her book, which is sparsely footnoted and makes few references to current literature in the field, offers a limited perspective on what "leading the race" meant to African American elites.

For Washington historians, one of the bogies in this field remains Constance McLaughlin Green's (1967) *The Secret City*, which described the era's black elite as self-absorbed, jealous, and uninterested in the plight of other African Americans. In Green's view, the "nadir" of African American history was also the nadir of black leadership.[4] Although three decades of subsequent scholarship have produced more nuanced and insightful portraits of black leadership in this era, Moore still seems to be trying to debunk Green by showing that black elites were, in fact, committed to racial leadership and engaged in substantive debates. *Leading the Race* grants Green's ghost too much roaming room.

Moore's book would have benefited from a closer engagement with more recent interpretations of black leadership in this period. For instance, newer scholarship avoids the rigid proposition that black elites were either wholly unaccountable to poorer African Americans, or believed in straightforward racial solidarity across classes. In an important 1996 book, for example, Kevin Gaines argued that black elites of the era used the ideology of racial uplift to lead, but also to emphasize their distance from–and superiority to–"the presumably undeveloped black majority" (p. 2).[5] An engagement with this newer line of thinking might have pushed Moore to provide a more textured explanation of how African American elites understood their relationship to less fortunate African Americans. Also, Moore maintains that elite black women formed their own clubs because they felt beleaguered by white men who attacked their sexual virtue and rejected by white women who discriminated against them in philanthropic activities (for example, p. 162). In a 1991 article, however, Stephanie Shaw demonstrated that turn-of-the-century black women's club activism was part of a continuous tradition of community work stretching far back into the nineteenth century. This fact necessarily complicates the proposition that elites' community activism was simply a response to the tightening strictures of the Jim Crow era.[6]

Moore's linear argument that black elites moved from assimilationism to race pride between 1880 and 1920 oversimplifies what has been, in fact, a continuous dialectic between a commitment to civil rights within white-dominated society and a dedication to encouraging separate African American institutions. There is little evidence–in Moore's book or in the historical record–to support the argument that Reconstruction-era black elites sought only to "better their own condition and gain acceptance in the white world," without consideration for poorer African Americans (p. 188). To the contrary, many of Washington's African American elites of the 1860s and 1870s were committed to race-based activism.[7] For instance, during the Civil War, a number of elite black women–including Elizabeth Keckley, the seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln–helped organize a freedmen's relief organization to distribute food and other supplies to poor ex-slaves. As Keckley explained, the women hoped to "relieve them [the freedpeople] as far as we are able, to advise with and counsel them, feeling it to be our duty to assist them toward a higher plane of civilization." Many African American elites of the 1860s and 1870s shared this sense of obligation, one that mingled ideas of racial solidarity and class superiority. Well before the 1890s, then, Washington's African American elites had a serious appreciation for black leadership in such institutions as churches and the public schools, and they did not harbor naive hopes that racial discrimination would soon vanish.

Finally, Moore's study of Washington's black elite does not adequately define the subjects of her study. Because Leading the Race is based almost exclusively on records at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, it is slanted toward the small cohort of extremely elite people represented in that collection. Moore occasionally mentions a category of "subelites"–such as activist Nannie Helen Burroughs–who for reasons such as educational or familial background, or because of personal preference, were not members of the very highest echelons of African American society. Yet she does not discuss this distinction in any detail, and this makes her analysis inconsistent. Whereas sometimes she seems to be making claims about a very select group of families (as when she discusses summer vacations in exclusive resort towns), at other points she includes a broader swath of elite men and women (as when she discusses voluntary associations, schools, and business endeavors). A more thorough examination of black

and white newspapers, as well as the manuscript census, city directories, oral history collections, and non-Washington archives could yield a rich study capable of considering the boundaries of Washington's black elite and more clearly delineating what constituted "elite" status in the first place.

Despite these problems, Moore's book provides an interesting new account of the institutional lives of Washington's renowned black elite. It should be of interest to historians of Washington and also to those concerned with the institutional and professional lives of such nationally known figures as Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and the Bruce and Grimke families. Its central actors represent a critical bridge between the Civil War era and the protest politics of the twentieth century.

Endnotes

[1]. Other recent studies of black activism and class differences in this period include Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1991); Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[2]. Historians who have argued there was a clear break between the nineteenth-century African American leadership class and those who "led the race" in the twentieth century include August Meier, Kenneth Kusmer, Allan Spear, and Willard Gatewood.

[3]. Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Gatewood called Washington the "Capital of the Colored Aristocracy."

[4]. Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 143, 145, 153.

[5]. Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[6]. Stephanie Shaw, "Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women," Journal of Women's History 3, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 10-25.

[7]. This statement and the subsequent example are drawn from my dissertation, "Reconstructing the Nation's Capital: The Politics of Race and Citizenship in Washington, D.C., 1862-1878." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2001.

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