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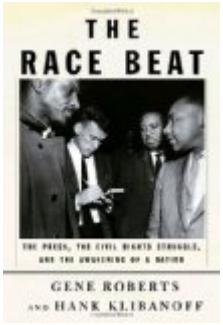
Gene Roberts, Hank Klibanoff. *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of America.* New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2006. 489 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-679-40381-4.



Reviewed by Jeanette McVicker

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The Race Beat appears at a crucial moment for considerations of the history of race and representation in the United States and of the often contradictory role played by the national news media in covering it. Authors Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff--each of whom has logged reporting time in the south, Roberts doing so during the Civil Rights era--painstakingly record the stories of the black and white journalists who, in the years following World War II, focused the nation's attention on the myth of "separate but equal" through the frequently riveting coverage of blacks' struggle for full legal integration. The book, which has won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in history, reminds readers living in a media-saturated age what it was like for journalists to realize the awesome power the press held to inspire change.

Roberts, former national editor for the *New York Times* and current professor of journalism at the University of Maryland, and Klibanoff, who spent twenty years at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* before becoming managing editor for news at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, take the landmark Carnegie Corporation report "An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern America" (1944) as a critical point of departure for their primary organizing focus: the power of the press to "publicize" the system of legal segregation in the United States. The term was used by Swedish economist and statesman Gunnar Myrdal, commissioned by Carnegie's board to "conduct a comprehensive study of race in America, and especially of segregation and white supremacy in the South," as a scholar from a country without the taint of colonialism or "a history of domination" (p. 7). Roberts and Klibanoff's decision to adopt this particular framework for their narrative is certain to generate tremendous debate as the book enters the contemporary discourse on race, not least because of the controversial reception of the Carnegie report among black intellectuals from the moment it appeared and particularly after 1965.

Shocked by the conditions he witnessed in the South in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Myrdal "concluded that there was one barrier between the white northerner's ignorance and his sense of

outrage that the [American] creed was being poisoned. That barrier was knowledge, incontrovertible information that was strong enough, graphic enough, and constant enough to overcome 'the opportunistic desire of the whites for ignorance'" about the horrific conditions codified through post-Reconstruction legislation (p. 6). Roberts and Klibanoff laud Myrdal's "uncannily prescient conclusion," namely that "*to get publicity is of the highest strategic importance to the Negro people*" (emphasis in original, p. 6). They write:

"More remarkable than the study's impact was its foresight. The coming years would prove, time and again, the extraordinary connection between news coverage of race discrimination--publicity, as Myrdal called it--and the emerging protest against discrimination--the civil rights movement, as it became known. That movement grew to be the most dynamic American news story of the last half of the twentieth century.... From the news coverage came significant and enduring changes not only in the civil rights movement but also in the way the print and television media did their jobs. There is little in American society that was not altered by the civil rights movement. There is little in the civil rights movement that was not changed by the news coverage of it. And there is little in the way the news media operate that was not influenced by their coverage of the movement" (p. 7).

Drawing on oral histories, personal interviews, doctoral dissertations, and master's theses in conjunction with more traditionally sourced information in books, periodicals, and archives (the source lists in the appendix are extensive and timely for journalism historians), the book reveals that the coverage--first in the pages of a vibrant black press with a tradition dating to the 1820s, then in the pages of the reluctant mainstream (white) press, and subsequently on network television--did expose the shocking reality of black life in America, at least as it existed in the rural South. It did so in the immediate aftermath of the United States finding itself in an international position of moral leadership following the end of World War II, a war that the black press had generally struggled to support given that it was fought with segregated armed forces. The myth of American equality unraveled rapidly as the staggering humiliations suffered by black soldiers returning to their own country after fighting for others' freedom became broadly known.

Early chapters help define the period between the end of World War II and the landmark Supreme Court decision, ***Brown v. Board of Education*** (1954), noting the critical contributions the black press made in covering the growing brutality, such as lynching, used to undo political and economic accomplishments from the Reconstruction era. Violence and white supremacist terrorism had resulted in the almost total disenfranchisement of blacks in the deep South. The book proceeds mostly chronologically, developing the role of the national press as it found its focus, expressed most often in coverage of legal challenges to segregation then circulating through the courts, particularly in regard to public facilities and especially schools. And it draws a sharp contrast between the almost total neglect of black life in the big northern dailies (except, as Myrdal's report puts it, as "crime news" [p. 5]) and the black press's struggle to expose the oppression blacks experienced while still depicting black identity in non-pathological terms. The trial surrounding fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, to which the authors devote an entire chapter, captured the complexity of such efforts. "The story of the Chicago kid visiting his mother's uncle in the late summer of 1955 and the trial of the two white men accused of beating him, shooting him in the head, and ditching him in a river with a seventy-pound cotton gin fan tethered to his neck with barbed wire" represented a "significant journalistic milestone" (p. 86), the authors say. Till's horrific death and the funeral in Chicago, which displayed the boy's broken body in an open casket, "brought Negro reporters into the heart of the white man's

kingdom--the courtroom." It also brought "white reporters into the Deep South in unprecedented numbers to cover a racial story" (p. 86). The authors quote Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, who said at the time, "the killers of the boy felt free to lynch him because there is in the entire state no restraining influence, not in the state capital, among the daily newspapers, the clergy nor any segment of the so-called better citizens" (quoted, p. 88).

The book's primary contribution to journalism history is arguably in its foregrounding the stories of a core of white liberal southern editors, key players in this history. These editors--Harry Ashmore in Charlotte, and later in Little Rock; Ralph McGill in Atlanta; Hodding Carter Jr. in Greenville, Mississippi; Buford Boone in Tuscaloosa; Lenoir Chambers in Norfolk; Bill Baggs in Miami; Hazel Brannon Smith in Lexington, Mississippi--"would write and speak with the proselytic power and majesty of the newly converted. While each had local issues to tackle editorially, they could be relied on to push for national unity, obeying federal law, and rising above regionalism" (pp. 24-25). Roberts and Klibanoff transform the litany of signature events and headlines of the times into a compelling daily human drama, bringing the reporters and editors and their subjects into sharper focus. Their meticulously documented interviews and archival investigations deliver a living chronicle that injects fresh perspective on a history, from the ***Brown*** decision to the events of Little Rock, Birmingham, and Selma, that we thought we already knew. One particularly chilling moment involves NBC's John Chancellor, deep in the Mississippi Delta, in the process of obtaining reactions to the 1956 verdict in the Till trial, who "immobilized" an angry mob by holding up the tiny microphone to his tape recorder as if it was "the technological equivalent of a crucifix" (p. 156). Terrified, he "blurted out, 'I don't care what you're going to do to me, but the whole world is going to know it.' The men stopped" (p. 156). For students of journalism, particularly, this book should be required reading.

The Race Beat has already generated copious praise since it appeared at the end of 2006. With a consistency worth noting, the reviews have begun to form a kind of parallel narrative, headlined something like the ***Christian Science Monitor***'s: "Mainstream journalism in the U.S. was late to the civil rights story--but powerful when it finally arrived"; or the ***Columbia Journalism Review***'s "The Desegregation Drama: the white news media came late to the scene. But when they did arrive, the battle was joined."[1]

What reviewers have thus far failed to mention, however, is that when the mainstream press finally did come to the story, it tended to oversimplify what might have been a vibrant and complex, even if conflicted, debate about the emergence of "American identity" in terms of the social constructedness of race, its imbrication with the status of women, and most of all, the shifting operation of capital within the geopolitical framework of the Cold War. The questioning of racial (and gendered) representation in culture, politics, and labor had already been taking place, however unevenly, in various ways in the black press since Reconstruction. Frederick Douglass, for example, conceptualized early versions of the issue in his work for the ***North Star*** (1847-51) as did David Walker in his ***Appeal*** during the Missouri Compromise debates of 1829-30. ***The Race Beat*** praises the important work performed by the black press, particularly after World War II, but generally does not discuss the agonized dialogue that had already been going on for a century regarding the establishment of black cultural identity as positive and self-fulfilling. The mainstream press merely cast the issue as "the Negro problem," i.e, the pathological darkness haunting white America's achievement of "progress."

More pertinent to the historical moment under discussion in the book is the way issues of black American identity and agency surfaced in

the magazines and journals associated with the Harlem Renaissance, including *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. Such issues also appeared in literature by black, white, and women writers and poets, as well as the journalistic forums and publications associated with the labor movement and the Communist Party between the wars. By focusing on achievement and uplift, rather than pathology, the Harlem Renaissance attempted to counter the negative constructions of black identity and culture that had largely come through the national media.

Circumscribing its coverage of racial issues to the legislative drama over institutional integration, the mainstream press thus tended to reproduce the blind spots regarding race and representation that had kept blacks out of the national eye in the first place, or had, minimally, allowed them into that line of vision primarily as a "problem" to be resolved. Myrdal's report reinforced this narrow frame of reference by advocating the "publicizing" of blacks' victim status so that northern whites would pay attention and advocate for the eradication of Jim Crow laws.

By choosing to position their history firmly within this liberal tradition, Roberts and Klibanoff also tend to reproduce a narrative paradigm that U.S. journalism seemed determined to cast itself within in order to justify its departure from the hallowed tradition of objectivity. (See, for example, the authors' discussion of the resignation of CBS's Howard K. Smith after network board chairman William S. Paley questioned his "editorializing" in the conclusion of a piece on Freedom Riders in Birmingham [p. 252].) While these journalists deserve well-earned praise for their frequent acts of courage and passionate advocacy for change, the liberal vision of democracy becomes the real hero of this story. What is lauded as the golden age of journalism in galvanizing the national will to end a system of racial apartheid, can also be seen, perhaps ironically, as the moment when black identity entered into the national mainstream almost exclusively in negative terms, a "problem" to be legislated.

Yet, other visions of black identity and democratic practice had competed for discussion in the crucial period between World War II and 1965, including a striking review of Myrdal's study for the Carnegie Corporation by Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* (1952) won the National Book Award in 1953. "An American Dilemma: A Review" was written in 1944, the year the Carnegie report appeared, although Ellison chose not to publish it for another twenty years. (It appeared in the collection *Shadow and Act*, published by Random House in 1964.) Ellison's opening paragraphs signal a very different perspective from the one embraced by the report and its underwriters at the prestigious Carnegie Corporation:

"Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* is not an easy book for an American Negro to review. Not because he might be overawed by its broad comprehensiveness; nor because of the sense of alienation and embarrassment that the book might arouse by reminding him that it is necessary in our democracy for a European scientist to affirm the American Negro's humanity; not even because it is an implied criticism of his own Negro social scientists' failure to define the problem as clearly. Instead, it is difficult because the book, as a study of a social ambiguity, is itself so...ambiguous...

In our society it is not unusual for a Negro to experience a sensation that he does not exist in the real world at all. He seems, rather, to exist in the nightmarish fantasy of the white American mind as a phantom that the white mind seeks unceasingly, by means both crude and subtle, to lay to rest....He locates the Negro problem 'in the heart of the [white] American...the conflict between his moral valuations on various levels of consciousness and generality.'...

For the solution of the problem of the American Negro and democracy lies only partially in the white man's free will. Its full solution will lie

in the creation of a democracy in which the Negro will be free to define himself for what he is and, within the large frame-work of that democracy, for what he desires to be...." (***Shadow and Act***, p. 303).

According to Shari Cohen, in a 2004 report for the Carnegie Corporation, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown* decision and the sixtieth anniversary of the Myrdal report, Ellison's argument "foreshadowed the criticism that the book would receive from black intellectuals in the late 1960s."[3] The final chapter of ***The Race Beat***, "Beyond," summarizes the fragmentation of unified national purpose regarding the question of race in post-1965 America, marking the irony of Watts exploding in anger that year, just five days after Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. Such contrasts presaged what the press would, from that point on, consistently term the new "militancy" of the movement. Yet a critique of the premises upon which the legislative integration that had formed the backbone of the civil rights movement was constructed had roots in those first contributions by blacks to the history of journalism (i.e., in work by Douglass, Walker, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and others). Roberts and Klibanoff trace the post-1965 turn in mostly negative terms, noting the shift in both rhetoric ("black power") and tactics (the use of violence if necessary) embraced by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); the rise of black nationalism in speeches by Malcolm X, the Black Panthers and others; and, above all, the sudden change in the way in which the white, mainstream press was now treated by those making news. This "dramatic reversal" in the status of white reporters covering the movement is crystallized in an emblematic quote by Karl Fleming, Los Angeles bureau chief, at the time, for ***Newsweek***: "To blacks in the South, I was one of the good guys...To blacks in Watts, I was just another faceless, exploitative whitey, someone to hate, and hurt" (quoted, p. 396).

Journalism historians who wish to amplify their reading would do well to start with Todd Vogel's edited collection, ***The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*** (2001), which provides a rich companion volume for reflecting on the history of the role of the black press in a variety of venues. Recent works on race by historians such as Robin D. G. Kelley (especially in ***Race Rebels*** [1994]), cultural critics such as Paul Gilroy (especially in ***Against Race*** [2000]), and feminist critics such as Robyn Wiegman (especially in ***American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*** [1997]), to name only a few texts that provide important dialogic counterpoint to Roberts and Klibanoff's historical focus, add multiple levels of nuanced critical analysis to our understanding of the press's discussion of race.

The Race Beat appears at a complex moment of a now-globalized discourse on race. Roberts and Klibanoff contribute a remarkable work of journalistic research that clearly fills a gap in the historical record of the Civil Rights era in the United States, yet reading the meticulously researched narratives in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the spontaneous marches by thousands of immigrants protesting immigration reforms, or the war on terrorism and coverage of Muslims in America, raises still-difficult questions concerning representation that are at the heart of American journalistic practice.

Notes

[1]. Review in the ***Christian Science Monitor*** by Michael O'Donnell (January 9, 2007); review in the ***Columbia Journalism Review*** by David K. Shipler (November/December 2006).

[2]. Ralph Ellison, "***An American Dilemma***: A Review," in ***Shadow and Act*** (New York: Random House, 1964): 303-317.

[3]. See "The Lasting Legacy of ***An American Dilemma"***, published at the Carnegie Corporation website: http://www.carnegie.org/results/07/index.html.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory

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