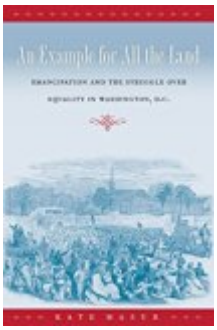
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kate Masur. *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 376 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3414-5.

Reviewed by Jacqueline Moore

Published on H-DC (October, 2011)

Commissioned by Mary Beth Corrigan (independent consultant)

In this well-researched if dense book, Kate Masur demonstrates how Washington DC became a laboratory for Reconstruction legislation that allows for a historical examination of the meaning of equality in the post-Civil War United States. She argues that Radical Republican rule in Congress enabled a series of far-reaching political reforms in the District, including voting rights and more general civic equality for African Americans. Black Washingtonians of all social classes worked actively to expand the concept of equality, whether through political lobbying, labor activism, or simply doing whatever they believed they had the right to do without fanfare or overt protest. Ultimately, white Washingtonians opposed to black equality joined with businessmen to argue that city government should be left to experts and that voting should be limited to the educated citizens alone. Arguing for a different sort of reform, this coalition succeeded in progressively disfranchising all Washington citizens and creating instead a commission government. The rhetoric which they used became standard throughout the South in the 1890s, as southern states began their own process of disfranchising African Americans.

Masur divides the book into six chapters, plus an epilogue, that follow roughly chronologically the period from the Civil War through 1878, the year in which Washington lost home rule on a permanent basis. Chapter 1 focuses on the politics of emancipation in the District during the Civil War and debates among African Americans over issues such as emigration to Africa. As Congress debated granting freedom to slaves, black leaders worked hard to alleviate conditions for the masses of black refugees who flooded the capital, and black soldiers in uniform pushed for rights to ride on the city's new streetcars. Chapter 2 discusses the largely unsuccessful efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau to shape working-class black morals and community life through regulations for housing projects and the establishment of industrial schools. Chapter 3 focuses on elite black efforts to lobby more formally for legal rights, as well as to

push for informal rights exemplified particularly by the struggle over access to streetcars.

The remainder of the book focuses on politics. Chapter 4 covers the campaign for black enfranchisement on the part of both elite and working-class African Americans as well as white debates over its significance. With the strong support of black voters, Washington elected a reform-oriented mayor in 1868, as well as a black member of the common council. This election led to a series of far-reaching reforms ending racial segregation in theaters, hotels, and saloons, among other social reforms. But such reforms were not uniformly accepted even within the Republican Party. Chapter 5 discusses the limits to which Republicans were willing to go by exploring the opposition to women's suffrage and school integration that would lead to social equality rather than simply political or civic equality. Using the argument that the city was mismanaged and debt-ridden, reformers sought to consolidate the three parts of Washington--Washington City, Georgetown, and Washington County--into one jurisdiction. This movement derived its strength from a coalition of Democrats and wealthy businessmen looking for efficiency and members of the Republican Party who were concerned that Radical reforms had gone too far. As a result, Congress created a new political body to rule the District, a territorial government, an appointed body that replaced the mayor and other elected officials. This system partially disfranchised all Washington citizens. Once in control of the territorial government, conservatives pushed for further disfranchisement, over black opposition. In Chapter 6 Masur discusses the events that followed as the new government, headed by Alexander Shepherd, dismantled most Republican reforms while expanding public works projects to satisfy unemployed workers and reconcile them to a commission system. Wealthy conservatives balked at such expenditures however, blaming poor blacks for economic decline in the city. They argued in more general terms that uneducated citizens had had too much voice in political decisions best left to experts. Following several scandals and an investigation, Congress created a city commission that completely disfranchised city residents in 1878.

As the author is quick to highlight, this is the first serious book on Reconstruction in Washington since 1958. Given the recent surge of books on blacks during Reconstruction and Reconstruction politics, a reevaluation was necessary. Masur clearly adds to the story the voices of both working-class and elite African Americans pushing the limits of equality. Her discussion of the impact of black laborers in the strike of 1871 on local politics is particularly illuminating. After their victory in reorganizing the government, the people who had supported uniting the District into one entity needed to ensure support of the city's workers, whom they were claiming to represent. To do so, they called for large-scale public works projects that would provide jobs for laborers. However, they could not provide them for everyone, and the glut of unemployed, unskilled laborers meant that wages were low. Both black and white workers went on strike at first, but the white workers returned after a few days. Black workers, Masur explained, had more to lose in a system where they could not elect their city officials, as there was no longer a way to ensure government patronage if they could not threaten to vote them out of office. As the Republican Party also increasingly abandoned black voters in the later years of Reconstruction, African Americans had little recourse to deal with their problems through formal political structures, and so had to depend more on street action. Nonetheless their activism led to accusations of communism and radicalism that caused other, previously sympathetic, Republicans to criticize black demands, further opening the door to disfranchisement.

Masur also relates the fascinating story of Kate Brown, a light-skinned African American woman who worked in the ladies' retiring room of the U.S. Senate. In 1868, Brown staged a protest

against segregation on train cars by purchasing a round-trip ticket to Alexandria, Virginia, and riding in the "ladies' car," typically reserved for white women only. She rode without incident to Virginia but was asked to leave the car on the return trip. Brown refused and braced herself against the door as white policeman tried to force her to leave, beating and kicking her. Brown vowed to stay until death but was dragged off when several other white men came to the policeman's aid. Facing debilitating injury, she was the cause of a Senate investigation, sued the railroad company, and eventually won an award of $1,500. Stories such as these show clearly that African Americans were active in demanding their own rights and far from quiet in so doing. In fact, they used public space such as the streetcars as ways of making sure their voices were heard.

Unfortunately the book has some weaknesses. The prose is extremely dense and the argument at times overly complicated. This is not a book to skim lightly or read at leisure. Perhaps Masur's most unfortunate choice is to use the term "upstart claims" to describe black Washingtonians' attempts to expand the concept of equality and challenge discrimination. Such language makes it sound as if the claims were somehow unmerited, and sounds dangerously close to "uppity." Her overall argument of Washington as an example to all is a bit belabored at times. Kate Brown's story itself shows us that while Washington was willing to experiment with bending some social rules, it was an example that even neighboring states, like Virginia, were not willing to follow.

Lastly, Masur takes on unnecessary arguments at times. Her discussion of women's suffrage, although an attempt to broaden the discussion beyond African Americans, seems an unnecessary distraction from the main argument. She also misses the point when she implies that historians have overemphasized separation between elite blacks and the black masses, arguing that in fact they were active supporters of universal black rights. In truth there should be no argument here, as recent historians (myself included) argue that members of the black elite only separated themselves socially from the black working classes, but politically they fought for the uplift of all African Americans. Masur also contradicts herself. Having maybe stretched the concept of an egalitarian elite-masses relationship in earlier chapters, she later argues that leading blacks frequently said that "they were not seeking to level so-called social distinctions" and thus were not fighting class (p. 231). Moreover, while she says that a "focus on the upper-reaches of racial discrimination did not necessarily imply inattention to the plight of the black poor," she nonetheless seems to reinforce images of such a focus (p. 231).

Despite these weaknesses, the book does have a lot to offer the patient reader, particularly those looking for ways to blend discussion of race in with larger political debates. In the contemporary context, the terms "taxpayers" and "citizens" can be as fraught with racist undertones as they were in Washington in the late 1860s. By reinterpreting Washington's Reconstruction politics in their racial context, Masur has certainly written a more inclusive, and more accurate, historical portrait that can be an example to those who seek to explore issues of voting rights and black disfranchisement in a larger context.

peruse

,

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

Citation: Jacqueline Moore. Review of Masur, Kate. *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.*. H-DC, H-Net Reviews. October, 2011.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31818