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Book Review: Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina

Charles Sicignano

University of West Georgia, charlie@westga.edu

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Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina. Moore, Leonard. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. 302 pages. ISBN 978-0-8071-3590-7. \$35.

“Police brutality has been a source of frustration, anger, and rage for African Americans throughout the postwar period.” Leonard Moore’s first sentence is also his thesis statement, and over the next 250 pages, he explains in excruciating detail the birth of African American distrust of law enforcement and how that snowballed into an atmosphere of hostility cutting across race, class, and inspired all levels of neighborhood activism. It’s very easy to assume that the Postwar culture of a town like New Orleans would be strictly limited to racial strife, but Moore dissects this question and his research indicates that on top of dealing with the issue of race, there were real concerns regarding class, especially within the black community, making the whole topic of crime and protection in New Orleans a field of political landmines.

The challenge in taking on a subject like this one is that there are many gray areas in the nature of evidence. “While white

supremacist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens’ Council were quite visible in the postwar South, they did not engage in lynchings and other forms of racial violence that were typical of the plantation South because of the urban setting,” Moore writes in his introduction (p. 2). Moore’s point in this statement is that the racism remained but the methods of discrimination had changed. As other cities started to do the same, what you get is the birth of “institutional racism.” These civil rights violations were harder to prove because there was a convenient lack of evidence that made prosecutions difficult, especially in the area of police department corruption. “Instead, the local police department, with the support of politicians, segregationists, district attorneys, and judges, carried out extralegal violence against African Americans, realizing that black southerners had no visible means of redress” (p. 2).

Another challenge in documenting police brutality and the community’s response is finding the fine line between meticulous research and tedious detail. In Moore’s case, it’s both a blessing and a curse. There are times when poring over every detail of a contentious meeting between the New Orleans City Council can seem to deflect from the bigger point, but how else do you prove that the city council has continuously ignored the community’s concerns about the protection to which they are entitled? This is an area where Moore doesn’t have much of a choice and he has to include all of it for the reader to make that decision.

The subject of class really becomes more of an issue during the mayoral election of Ernest Morial in 1977. He was the first black mayor of New Orleans and won his initial election with a broad coalition of supporters. Moore reports that Morial still

faced many credibility problems immediately, including that he was “fair-skinned and could pass for white if he chose to”; others felt that he “had not paid enough dues” as a black politician despite the numerous racial barriers he had already broken (p. 141). These criticisms were an indicator of how things would go during his tenure as mayor. In the city of New Orleans, any discussion regarding police protection, voting behavior or political leadership would always include an analysis of race or class (or both). Moore seems to think that all of these subjects are inevitably linked whether we like it or not, and all of

this contributes to cases of political and police corruption in urban areas, both inside and outside New Orleans. Moore concludes that this environment contributed to the ambiguous lawlessness we saw in the days immediately after Hurricane Katrina.

Recommended for academic libraries that offer materials in African American history, sociology and criminal justice/legal studies.

Charles Sicignano

Ingram Library, University of West Georgia