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# Black Teachers and the Struggle for Racial Equality

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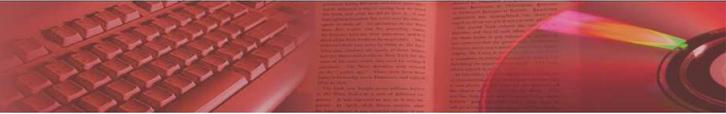
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**Adam Fairclough.** *Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow.* Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001. x + 110 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2272-8.

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## Black Teachers and the Struggle for Racial Equality

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How should we view the role of southern black educators during the long struggle for black equality, both before and after the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*? Were these educators traitors to the goal of racial improvement, embracing accommodationism at the expense of black interests? Or did they do the best they could under difficult circumstances to educate and nurture black children, helping to lay the groundwork for the eventual assault on Jim Crow?

In this series of three lectures delivered at Mercer University, Adam Fairclough, Professor of American History at the University of East Anglia, attempts to address the role of southern black educators in the larger quest for racial equality. In so doing, Fairclough urges us to abandon the notion that southern black educators were either "race traitors" or heroes, adopting instead Glenda Gilmore's notion that black educators frequently functioned as "double agents" who ultimately did promote black equality, albeit in an indirect manner.[1] Fairclough writes in the tradition of other recent scholars, such as Vanessa Siddle Walker, who have emphasized the positive attributes of segregated schools for the development of African Americans.[2]

Fairclough's book is comprised of three lectures: "Liberation or Collaboration? Black Teachers in the Era of White Supremacy," "Robert R. Moton and the Travail of the Black College President," and "Black Teachers and the Civil Rights Movement." Each of the lectures probes the ways in which black educators positively influenced both black education and the struggle for black equality. Addressing the claim that "agitation and protest, not education and self-improvement broke down the walls of Jim Crow" (p.

10), Fairclough argues that black educators, though they rarely challenged segregation, played a significant role in combating white supremacy and promoting black equality through their role as educators of black children. He concludes his final lecture with this claim: "During the grim years of Jim Crow black teachers had to work within the confines of segregation and were unable to furnish overt political leadership. Yet in resisting the basic ideas of white supremacy-racism and inequality-they helped to undermine the Jim Crow regime. By insisting upon the sanctity of knowledge and the innate humanity of black children, they performed political work of the most far-reaching kind" (p. 67). In his first lecture, Fairclough considers the role of black teachers during the Jim Crow era. Fairclough notes appropriately at the outset that education "has been one of the most important political battlefields in the South, and black teachers were at the center of that battlefield. Southern whites sought to control them, fearful that educated blacks would lead movements for equality" (pp. 1-2).

Fairclough argues that black teachers during the Jim Crow era labored under extraordinary burdens. Faced with a dearth of material resources, they had a constant need to placate whites in order to secure both private and public funds for their schools. At the same time, black educators were expected to fulfill an array of roles beyond that of school teacher—"public health workers, Sunday school teachers, home visitors, agricultural experts, fundraisers, adult literacy teachers, racial diplomats, moral examples, all-around pillars of the community, and general uplifters of the race" (p. 14). Notwithstanding those varied demands, Fairclough argues that black teachers played a crucial role in helping southern blacks resist the crush of white supremacist bile through education and nur-

ture. Citing Charles Johnson, Fairclough concludes that “the white South failed to construct a true ‘caste system’ because black people never internalized racist values” (p. 19), in significant measure because of the work of black teachers.

Fairclough also addresses the question of the success of black schools during the age of Jim Crow. Were black schools of the early twentieth century a failure, as some have suggested, because they did not reverse the political and economic inequality confronting African Americans?[3] Fairclough appropriately concludes that black education must be viewed through the lens of the possible, rather than the ideal. To suggest that black education failed during the first half of the twentieth century because it did not succeed in reversing the profound economic and political disadvantages under which southern blacks labored is unfair. Rather, Fairclough argues, we should consider black education in the context of what was possible to accomplish. Viewed in that light, black education enjoyed some successes, such as the fomenting of black pride and black uplift. That it failed to transform the role of southern blacks is not so much an indictment of education as it is a reflection of the extraordinary circumstances under which black children and teachers labored. In his second essay, “Robert R. Moton and the Travail of the Black College President,” Fairclough takes on the widely-held notion that black college presidents in the Jim Crow South undermined the struggle for racial equality with their overt support for separate education. As with black teachers, Fairclough emphasizes the extraordinary financial and political difficulties which southern black college presidents confronted. Taking those difficulties into account, Fairclough offers a generous assessment of their work:

“Black college presidents resorted to evasions and compromises, some of them humiliating. But the benefits of what they wrought outweighed the costs. Most obviously, they increased the educational opportunities available to southern black youth: the number of black college students steadily increased, from 12,000 in 1928 to 37,000 in 1941 and 74,000 in 1950” (pp. 35-36).

The NAACP criticized the fact that this enrollment growth took place in the context of segregated institutions, but Fairclough responds that these colleges made available to black youth that which was simply unavailable in racially mixed settings. Moreover, Fairclough argues, “[b]lack colleges provided in-

tellectual space for staff and students to develop a critique of white supremacy” (p. 36). In short, black colleges provided the nurture, training, and encouragement for the next generation of black youth to challenge the racial status quo. Fairclough does concede that black college presidents frequently were forces of resistance during the civil rights era, as many chose to expel, rather than support, those student protesters who challenged Jim Crow (pp. 39-40). Fairclough, however, defends these actions as pragmatic: “was their desire to save black colleges so worthy of condemnation? Those institutions were part of the sinew, brains, and soul of the black community” (p. 40).

Fairclough pays particular attention to the role of Robert R. Moton, successor to Booker T. Washington as president of Tuskegee Institute. Concerning Moton, Fairclough notes:

“Moton sought power not for self-aggrandizement but for the benefit of Tuskegee Institute, for the improvement of black education, and for progress toward racial equality. The last goal was sometimes disguised, often compromised, and more evident in his private than his public actions. But it was consistent, and Moton pursued it doggedly and sometimes courageously. Yes, Moton accommodated to southern segregation. But he never accepted the racist rationale for Jim Crow, and he never envisaged segregation as a natural or permanent condition” (p. 26).

In his final lecture, Fairclough considers the role of black educators during the civil rights movement. Scholars have long noted that many black teachers during the civil rights era opposed both the actions of civil rights protesters as well as the goal of racial mixing.[4] Conceding such opposition, Fairclough argues that black teachers nevertheless played an important role in the civil rights movement by providing a strong education for black children and by insisting on greater resources for black schools. Fairclough explains:

“In establishing schools and then struggling to raise standards, teachers helped to point the race in the direction of equality. Through patient, persistent advocacy they also persuaded influential whites—including many southerners—that public education should embody some measure of equality. Finally, if we examine the Civil Rights movement itself more carefully, we discover that teachers contributed to the NAACP’s expansion in the South and helped to initiate the NAACP’s attack on segregated education”

(p. 47).

To be sure, black educators were at the forefront of demanding greater resources for black schools during the 1940s, even at the risk of alienating their white employers. These efforts enjoyed significant success, as funding for black education dramatically increased during the decade prior to the 1954 Brown decision. Fairclough notes appropriately that by engaging in this struggle for greater resources, black teachers significantly improved the educational opportunities of their students and thereby helped equip them to engage in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s.

Fairclough responds directly to the claim of NAACP attorney Constance Baker Motley[5] and others that black teachers became “a major foe of school desegregation” after Brown (p. 64). First, Fairclough notes that many black teachers did oppose racial segregation, voting for example, to abolish separate black teacher organizations during the 1960s. Second, Fairclough argues that black teachers reasonably feared that school integration would force the closure of black schools and the dismissal of black teachers: “Black teachers had particular worries, because integration—as whites were quick to point out—would involve shutting down black schools, phasing out black colleges, and abolishing thousands of jobs” (p. 63). In fact, school integration did produce each of those effects. Fairclough also questions the long-term effects of racial integration:

“[W]idespread disappointment over the results of integration provided a useful corrective to the NAACP’s harsh judgments on black teachers. In many cities, the public schools integrated only to re-segregate. Even when black and white children attend the same schools, the educational benefits have proved elusive. Moreover, integration came at a high price; it closed thousands of schools that blacks had built at great personal sacrifice and that had provided vital community cohesion. Many have wondered whether integration merited that cost” (p. 65).

So what should we make of Fairclough’s thesis that black educators played a more positive role in the struggle for black equality than many have suggested? Fairclough is surely correct to argue that we cannot evaluate the behavior of black educators, particularly during the Jim Crow era, without due consideration for the difficult context in which they operated. Rather than demonize those black teach-

ers who supported racial separation, Fairclough provides a useful corrective that allows us to consider the contributions of black educators in the context of a Jim Crow universe. Fairclough invites us to consider ways in which black educators did contribute to black equality by providing nurture, support, and knowledge for black children in the darkest days of Jim Crow and by challenging the racist stereotypes of white supremacists. Black teachers may not have challenged separate schools during the Jim Crow era, but they helped lay the groundwork for future challenges to Jim Crow through their roles as educators.

Fairclough is also correct to note that black educators did help garner significant resources for black schools, particularly during the 1940s, but these efforts were successful only to the extent that the NAACP could offer a credible threat that the failure to grant equal resources might trigger racial mixing. Southern school districts granted additional resources to black schools during the decade prior to Brown in significant measure because they recognized that the gross inequality between black and white schools left them vulnerable to legal attack. Thus, the struggle of black educators for greater resources for segregated black schools depended on the ability of the NAACP to plausibly threaten judicially-mandated racially mixed schools.

Fairclough appropriately suggests that school integration has had mixed results and has had a devastating impact on many all-black schools. But Fairclough ignores the fact that school integration, or the threat thereof, was largely responsible for the substantial increase in resources for the education of black children from the 1940s through the 1970s.[6] Many in the NAACP urged school integration, arguing that school boards would never allocate sufficient resources for the education of black children unless those children were in the same classrooms as white children. The oft-repeated slogan, “Green follows White,” proved apt across the South. Those who minimize the value of school integration must consider the fact that the return to single-race schools will likely be accompanied by an increase in inequality of educational resources between white and minority children.

Fairclough’s eloquently written book provides an excellent consideration of the role of southern black educators in extraordinarily difficult times. As we continue to reconsider the long struggle for black

equality, the themes that Fairclough invites us to consider should play a prominent role.

Notes

[1]. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 186.

[2]. Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[3]. As Fairclough notes, a number of scholars have criticized the notion that public schools were “engines of democracy and equality” (p. 11). Fairclough directs us to the work of some of these scholars: Walter Feinberg, *Reason and Rhetoric: The Intellectual Foundations of Twentieth-Century Liberal Educational Policy* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975); Ira Katznelson and Margaret Weir, *Schooling for All: Class, Race, and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Clarence

J. Karier, “Testing for Order and Control in the Liberal State,” in Clarence J. Karier, Paul C. Violas, and Joel Spring, eds., *Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973), 108-37; Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

[4]. See, for example, Richard Lamanna, “The Negro Public School Teacher and School Desegregation: A Survey of Negro Teachers in North Carolina,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1966.

[5]. Constance Baker Motley, *Equal Justice Under Law: An Autobiography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 111.

[6]. See, for example, Davison M. Douglas, *Reading, Writing & Race: The Desegregation of the Charlotte Schools* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 21-22.

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