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Bayer, Ronald. Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews, and Italians of New York City, 1929-1941. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978. Pp. xiv, 232.

Ronald Bayer's book is an interesting blend of urban and ethnic history. There have been, of course, many studies about the experience of specific ethnic groups in New York City, most notably those dealing with the Jewish, Irish and Italian communities. There have also been a number of comparative works which have examined the pattern of ethnic inter-action during specific periods of time: Immigrant Life in New York City, 1815-1863 by Robert Ernest and Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan are two of the more interesting examples of this approach. While Bayer's work has much in common with these two studies, it exhibits a number of important differences. The most obvious difference is his concentration on the period between the advent of the Great Depression and the involvement of the United States in World War II. In these years the immigration gates were firmly closed and there was considerable agitation over which ethnic groups were most entitled to employment opportunities and government patronage. As the competition became more intense--and as the possibility of global war loomed larger--there was a tendency to brand rival ethnic groups as "un-American":

In all cases a struggle over interests and values, based on realistic and unrealistic factors, was present. The key element in initiating these conflicts was a sense of threat. Groups which felt threatened in a number of ways, and had no reason for moderating their hostilities, found themselves in the most intense conflict. (164)

Perhaps the most interesting sections of the book relate to the conflict between the Jewish and Irish communities for jobs, political influence and residential domination. The Irish, who themselves had gradually clawed their way up the social ladder during the previous century, were not prepared to give way easily to these aggressive "non-Christian" newcomers. Through Tammany Hall and overtly anti-semitic organizations such as the Christian Front, the Irish sought to check the rapid increase in Jewish power in New York City. In this campaign, the weapons of slander and violence were often utilized; but both internal and external factors worked to the advantage of the Jewish community. Of paramount importance was the 1933 election of Fiorello La Guardia, Republican, as mayor of New York City. His success was directly attributable to the political support he received from the 'newer' ethnic groups. La Guardia was particularly successful in attracting Jewish and Italian voters, and he was able to maintain this coalition throughout the 1930s despite the alliance between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, and the emergence, in the United States itself, of Italian anti-semitic organizations such as the Fascist League of North America.

Even more surprising was the detente between the Jewish and German communities. There was no substantial involvement of New York's German-Americans in anti-semitic organizations or Nazi front groups such as the German-American Bund. According to Bayor, this is to be explained by the growing vulnerability of the German-American community itself; within this group the fear was widespread that war between the United States and Nazi Germany would bring "a revival of the anti-German excesses of World War I" (74). By 1938 it was expedient for German-American leaders to take a stand not only against the American Nazis but also against Germany's anti-semitism.

Although the author provides an intriguing portrayal of ethnic conflict, this book is not without its shortcomings. One of the most serious of these is Bayor's failure to provide any information about New York's other ethnic groups; indeed, there is not even a statistical breakdown of the ethnic composition of the city. Of the groups omitted from the analysis the Anglo-American population is the one most sorely missed: not only were they the largest ethnic group, but they had dominated the life of New York throughout the nineteenth century. In his introductory chapters Bayor does mention "the nativist excesses of pre-Civil War America," emphasizing that this nativism was particularly pronounced "during periods of economic difficulty" (1-2). At this point in his analysis the "Anglo-Saxon" population ceases to exist, except for a few casual references to the fact that during the 1930s anti-semitism in the United States was at a high point. Unfortunately, Bayor neither analyzes this broader anti-semitism, nor places ethnic conflict in New York within the larger framework of the city's development.

In singling out Irish involvement in anti-semitic activity, Bayor makes a number of questionable observations. At one point, for example, he declares that "there was a feeling in the general Irish community that the Jews were responsible for the war" (156). The documentation for this provocative statement consists of a single interview with Irish politician Paul O'Dwyer and an excerpt from the New York Times. On page 147 widespread Irish anti-semitism is attributed, again without adequate documentation, to the irresponsibility of the city's Roman Catholic hierarchy: "church officials remained reluctant to acknowledge the seriousness of anti-semitism; and because of their own insecurities, they continued to point to anti-Christianity as the true peril."

But, on the whole, Neighbors in Conflict provides an imaginative approach for the study of both urban and ethnic history. By emphasizing ethnic inter-action, at both the city and ward level, Bayor has escaped the limitations so often associated with the study of a single ethnic group.

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