

Property and Poverty in New York: Books not Known to Mamie O'Rourke

Bridges, Amy. *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics*. Cambridge, London, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Pp. xi, 210. Tables, index. \$29.95 (U.S.)

Wilentz, Sean. *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. Pp. xiii, 446. 21 black and white plates. Tables, index. \$48.95 (U.S.)

Hartog, Hendrik. *Public Property and Private Power: The Corporation of the City of New York in American Law, 1730-1870*. Chapel Hill, N.C. and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983. Pp. xiv, 274. Tables, figures

Bruce C. Daniels

Volume 14, Number 2, October 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017996ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017996ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Daniels, B. C. (1985). Review of [Property and Poverty in New York: Books not Known to Mamie O'Rourke / Bridges, Amy. *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics*. Cambridge, London, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Pp. xi, 210. Tables, index. \$29.95 (U.S.) / Wilentz, Sean. *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. Pp. xiii, 446. 21 black and white plates. Tables, index. \$48.95 (U.S.) / Hartog, Hendrik. *Public Property and Private Power: The Corporation of the City of New York in American Law, 1730-1870*. Chapel Hill, N.C. and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983. Pp. xiv, 274. Tables, figures]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 14(2), 208–210. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017996ar>

The brochure is available from the Planning Branch of the National Capital Commission, 161 Laurier Ave. West, Ottawa, Canada. K1P 6J6.

* * *

Preliminary Listing of Ethnic Libraries, Museums, Archives and Research Centres. Compiled by Elizabeth Boghossian. Ottawa: Multiculturalism Canada, 1984. Pp. 78 (English) and 86 (French).

This listing embraces some 133 Canadian "ethnic resource facilities" with brief descriptions of their holdings and facilities.

It was compiled from lists of ethnic groups and organizations generated by the federal Multiculturalism Directorate, libraries, museums, and similar organizations. These were subsequently canvassed by mail to obtain basic data.

The list is indexed by ethnic group and by location, and is published under one cover in French and English.

It can be obtained from Information Services, Secretary of State, Ottawa K1A 0M5.

John H. Taylor
Book Review Editor
Department of History
Carleton University

**Property and Poverty in New York:
Books not Known to Mamie O'Rourke**

When me and Mamie O'Rourke tripped the light fantastic on the east side, the west side, and all around the town, neither of us knew much about the real history of the city we loved. "Me," a young professor and a sobersides, digested Richard Hofstadter's and Lee Benson's books in graduate school and found them useful shovels to bury Carl Becker's naive, semi-Marxist notions of class conflict in New York's distant past. Mamie, a nurse, slightly more fun-loving and much less pedantic, learned her local history from a combination of her old neighbourhood, a high school textbook, and Broadway shows. Both of us thought we knew New York well and, despite our differing approaches to historical methodology, we agreed on the following four basic propositions. (1). Machine politics in New York had been and still were based on a boss's skill in arranging the right blend of ethnic coalitions: he who balanced best, triumphed; he who miscalculated the mixture did not survive the political explosion. (2). Despite the presence of the rich, the average, and the poor, New York City residents had never had a well-

defined sense of class consciousness. Divisions among the population ran more along ethnic and racial lines than economic class ones. Mamie's Irish-Catholic mother did not want her to marry me because I was Protestant not because my mother had gone to a private school in New England. (3). New York's mayor had power and authority that surpassed that of most state governors and often equalled that of New York State's governor. Mayor Wagner's and Governor Rockefeller's predictable seasonal squabbles were as heated and entertaining as the subway series between baseball's Yankees and Dodgers. (4). As the most important city by far in the United States, New York set the pace for urban development and change in the nation. Good or bad, if it was going to happen, it happened first in New York. Although neither Mamie nor I liked or used the nickname, "The Big Apple," we both felt it was an apt description: our distaste came from its obvious redundancy.

Alas for post World-War-Two consensus history and for New York media and street-corner gossip, three recent extraordinary books show that Mamie and me were dead wrong on propositions one and two and confused on proposition three; only on the "Big Apple" view of New York City's pre-eminence were we substantially correct. These three books all focus on New York between the Revolutionary era and the Civil War; collectively they provide the freshest thought on the early nineteenth-century development of one American city to be produced by the present generation of urban historians. Because the city in question is New York, the work is all the more valuable. Because the period in question is the first half of the nineteenth century, a wedge of time sandwiched between and much less explored than the colonial and industrial eras, the work is more valuable yet.

* * *

Bridges, Amy. *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics.* Cambridge, London, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Pp. xi, 210. Tables, index. \$29.95 (U.S.).

Amy Bridges argues that machine politics in New York originated before the waves of immigration that are usually credited/blamed for forming the social base the bosses exploited to build their local empires. According to Bridges, two other factors that emerged simultaneously in Jacksonian America did more than the Irish migration to create the pre-conditions for Tammany Halls' dominance: the early stages of industrialization and the elimination of property qualifications as a barrier to the voting franchise. Industrialization recast New York's social order as workers replaced artisans and entrepreneurs replaced master craftsmen. The conflicts that labour historians such as E.P. Thompson describe as inevitable when capitalists aggrandize wealth and

workers articulate grievances were given an unusual virulence, Bridges believes, because they took place in a political arena that was newly opened to all adult white males. The political machine emerged unplanned as one expression of these social conflicts.

In essence, Bridges re-examines the relationship between capitalism and democracy. Liberal historians and a liberal society have always assumed a basic relationship existed between the two concepts: freedom in the marketplace complemented freedom at the ballot box. The liberty to choose one's job or start one's business was an economic equivalent to the political liberty to vote for the candidate of one's choice or run for office. Freedom is indivisible and contagious. Bridges has an equally symbiotic but very different view of the relationship between capitalism and democracy in antebellum America. Class conflict in the economic sphere inevitably led to class conflict in the political realm. The society of the early republic, which prized consensus and extolled a virtuous citizenry that rose above self-interest, rested on an economic base of journeymen and master craftsmen who shared common goals: they constituted an artisanal version of the independent yeoman who saw himself as different from the large landowner only by degree not by kind. Both were freemen in the classical republican thought of the eighteenth century. The city of the political machine expressed the destruction of classical republican thought. Sweatshop labourers shared little with their entrepreneurial employers except a mutual antagonism and eventually a willingness to translate that into political action. Bridges does not eliminate the role played by immigration from her analysis of the creation of the political machine. Boss Tweed and his successors provided too much evidence of the importance of catering to ethnic sensibilities for anyone to ignore. But, she points out that machine politics predate the first massive influx of immigrants, that almost all immigrants were workers, that political rhetoric was as often directed at social class as it was at ethnicities, and that somewhat similar political constellations were formed in England where immigration was not as important a factor.

* * *

Wilentz, Sean. *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. Pp. xiii, 446. 21 black and white plates. Tables, index. \$48.95 (U.S.).

One wonders if Sean Wilentz and Bridges raced each other into print. Both arrive at remarkably similar conclusions by mining the same empirical data and interpreting them in light of the same intellectual framework borrowed from English and European historians. Their specific goals are different: Bridges looks for the origins of the political machine; Wilentz looks for the origins of the nineteenth-century American working class mind. Wilentz believes, as

does Bridges, that the early industrial movement in Jacksonian New York created a city rife with class conflict. Taking specific aim at Lee Benson whom he terms counter-progressive, Wilentz argues that his work was naive and ignored inconvenient evidence. By showing that both the Democratic and Whig parties were led by a wealthy elite, Benson elevated ethnic and religious divisions in order to diminish the role of class divisions. Benson did not, however, examine the role of the Working Men Party of the late 1820s; the rhetoric of many New York leaders who persistently called for equality of property distribution; the hundreds of strikes and labour uprisings; and, finally, the great year of turmoil, 1850, during which bloody riots, strikes, and radical political challenges convulsed the city in a manner Wilentz feels nearly approached the European revolutions of 1848.

American historians have not appreciated the importance of class conflict in antebellum cities, Wilentz argues, because they have measured it against an idealized model of European class consciousness. Finding that American society did not replicate European society, historians have assumed no class-consciousness was articulated. Wilentz's criticism is telling and could be applied to many other historical arguments. Radical historians often dismiss liberal discussions of western democracy and civil liberties as so much cant because every western country's policy falls short of theoretical definitions of both concepts: consensus historians historically have labelled American Populism as backward looking and stripped it of its radicalism because farmers remained attached to individual property ownership and did not embrace collectivism. Wilentz's insistence that class-consciousness in New York City should be evaluated in American not European terms removes a series of red herrings that have diverted many other attempts to write an honest history of the American working class.

That immense changes occurred in New York between the election of Jackson and the Civil War, and that the changes involved the rise of a militant class of workers who abandoned the social ideals of harmony and the political ideal of consensual government, is demonstrated beyond question by Wilentz. The artisans of the early republic maintained the collective individualism of colonial America; the sweatshops of the 1830s created class-conscious confrontation. When spelled out by such a gifted scholar and stylist as Wilentz, the changes seem inevitable and perhaps too obvious to require identification and explanation. But, if one pauses to think about most treatments of the Jacksonian era, the key words and concepts emphasized in them are usually democracy, individualism, opportunity, and western settlement not class consciousness, collectivism, poverty, and urban change. Both sides of the Jacksonian coin must be examined before we can fully appreciate the era.

* * *

Hartog, Hendrik. *Public Property and Private Power: The Corporation of the City of New York in American Law, 1730-1870*. Chapel Hill, N.C. and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983. Pp. xiv, 274. Tables, figures.

Hendrik Hartog does not examine the origins or consequences of class consciousness in New York, but like Bridges and Wilentz he describes a monumental change that occurred in New York City in the early nineteenth century: that change also involved an ideological questioning of the rights associated with private property. At the end of the Revolution, New York City existed as a municipal corporation with many near-autonomous powers similar to the ones enjoyed in the English closed corporations and boroughs. Hartog does not fully describe the colonial or English origins of these powers but English historians will recognize the sense of local independence from outside authorities as the natural culmination of centuries of attempts by burghers to remove themselves from the control of the nobility and gentry. "Town air makes free" expresses much of that spirit of town/urban self-assertiveness. The freedom of the municipal corporation, however, in both England and colonial America, was exercised not by the masses but by the property owners who viewed themselves somewhat as stockholders. Municipal corporations remained essentially closed and dominated by the few not the many.

Over the century of growth after the Revolution, New York City gradually lost almost all of its legal autonomy and became in essence a constitutional creature of the state government. Although most students of local government and most lawyers are aware of the relationship between modern state and town/city/county government, few Americans realize that federalism has only two levels and that the modern locality has no constitutional role. It is a sub-unit of the state government in legal theory. Cities exist at the pleasure of the state which can alter or abolish them at any time they can muster the political muscle and will.

Hartog's analysis of the erosion of the concept of the constitutional power of the municipal corporation is the best account of it ever produced for a specific American city. The same expansion of the rights of ordinary people that Bridges and Wilentz see as creating the involvement of the working classes in politics explains much of the transformation that occurred in legal theory. The prerogative of local property owners to control New York was challenged by the rising swell of the Jacksonian tide. Property was private: cities should be public. According to Hartog, many groups and issues contributed to the destruction of New York's private nature. City leaders sought financial aid from the state legislature to promote commercial expansion; court disputes often tested the limits of the city's power and the city invariably lost; political parties and leaders found it advantageous at the polls to commit the city to the public sphere. This transition was capped and its results became manifestly obvious to all in 1857 when the New York State appellate

judges confirmed a massive reorganization of the city's government by the state legislature that had disregarded the city charter and been opposed by the city. In effect, this signalled the destruction of the charter and the completion of New York's metamorphosis from a propertied corporation to a public instrumentality of state power.

* * *

So, Mamie, poor New York has been seething with class resentment and hasn't got a political leg to stand on. Neither on the east side, the west side, nor any part of town has our New York been the city we thought it was. Right? Not quite. These three distinguished books, each of prize-winning quality, have made you and I aware of things we never knew — historical New York may never be the same — but they don't tell all of the story and we should be careful not to extend their implications beyond their research.

Economic classes change over generations, usually gradually and seldom dramatically — but they do change. Just because in one historical period economics were more important than national origins in the class-ethnicity combustible mixture that fueled the political machine, not necessarily have things stayed the same. Bridges does not state that they have and we should not assume it. Moreover, one must marvel at the ability of the political process to contain the working-class anger Wilentz has shown us once existed. New York City has not had a revolution since 1776: the Democratic Party's success in defusing the crisis of 1850 needs a little more exploration. Although a full account of the Democrats' machinations in 1850 remains to be written, somehow the party's actions seem to be a wonderful example of what Daniel Boorstin, who wouldn't know a class-conscious mind if he bumped into one, called the "genius of American politics." And the fact that New York City is as powerless in a constitutional sense as every other American city should not lead to the unwarranted conclusion that it is weak politically. Its leaders and citizens have extraordinary muscle in the real world of practical politics that transcends the theoretical world of two-tier federalism.

Finally, Mamie, it's clear that Bridges, Wilentz, and Hartog agree that New York has been the number one American city since the beginning of the nation. It made Tammany Hall a household name; it was the most radical city in the United States, and it was the city that the rest of the country watched and copied even when it lost.

Bruce C. Daniels
Book Review Editor
Department of History
University of Winnipeg