

## Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW  
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Greenberg, Brian. *Worker and Community: Response to Industrialization in a Nineteenth-Century American City, Albany, New York 1850-1884*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985. Pp. ix, 227. Map, index. \$34.50 cloth; \$12.95 paper (U.S.)

Oestreicher, Richard Jules. *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986. Pp. xiv, 263. Figures, 7 black and white plates, index. \$24.95 (U.S.)

Allen Seager

Volume 16, Number 3, February 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017747ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017747ar>

[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

Seager, A. (1988). Review of [Greenberg, Brian. *Worker and Community: Response to Industrialization in a Nineteenth-Century American City, Albany, New York 1850-1884*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985. Pp. ix, 227. Map, index. \$34.50 cloth; \$12.95 paper (U.S.) / Oestreicher, Richard Jules. *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986. Pp. xiv, 263. Figures, 7 black and white plates, index. \$24.95 (U.S.)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 16(3), 299–301. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017747ar>

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 1988

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

tion, rejected by most and temporary to many of those who did adopt it.

The family, a traditional base of solidarity in industrial slums, was much weaker in the deindustrialized slum because the peculiarities of the port economy reduced the frequency of family formation and the ability of families to take in aged relatives. Moreover, the iron discipline and the indignity of life in the *ateliers de charité* of Antwerp were particularly harsh. And so, the author argues, the town's proletariat relied heavily on "dense social networks" of mutual aid before succumbing to the workhouse or the street. The assisted poor in every case were not a discrete *lumpen-proletariat* but rather part of a larger working class whose members were only too aware that they themselves might easily become the objects of charity in hard times.

Professor Lis's analysis is densely packed and concise, perhaps too much so; at times she falls into the arid pattern of simply explicating her excellent quantitative work. Her book needs a Henry Mayhew or Restif de la Bretonne to provide some illustrative detail, colour and immediacy. A clearer discussion of systems of assistance and their underlying philosophy would also have been helpful. Her dismissal of private charity, for example, is somewhat perfunctory. Bourgeois donors, she argues, on rather slim evidence, were consciously propping up the social order rather than simply responding to need and to their own humanitarian impulses, an assertion that evokes, to the reader, E. P. Thompson's warning against "the enormous condescension of posterity." That having been said, however, Professor Lis has given here much of great scholarly value, presented with admirable economy.

Malcolm Greenshields  
Department of History  
University of Lethbridge

---

Greenberg, Brian. *Worker and Community: Response to Industrialization in a Nineteenth-Century American City, Albany, New York 1850-1884*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985. Pp. ix, 227. Map, index. \$34.50 cloth; \$12.95 paper (U.S.).

Oestreicher, Richard Jules. *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986. Pp. xiv, 263. Figures, 7 black and white plates, index. \$24.95 (U.S.).

In that curious intellectual amalgam called urban studies, community studies in labour or working class history have come to form an important ingredient. The collection of American monographs is particularly impressive, thanks in part to the two scholarly series whose recent offerings are

herein reviewed; the SUNY Series in American Social History (Charles Stephenson and Elizabeth Pleck, Editors), and the University of Illinois series, *The Working Class in American History* (David Brody, David Montgomery, and the late Herbert G. Gutman, Editorial Advisors). Neither series provides the reader with a statement of its *raison d'être* (and apart from personal acknowledgements to Stephenson and Montgomery by the two authors, the role of the general editors is also obscure) but judging from these volumes and others, they seem to represent a convergence of at least two historiographical themes. The first is the introduction of a Marxist perspective on social change in the United States, albeit in muted and modified forms; the second is that distinctively American quest for community, as an alternative counterpoint to prevailing ideologies.

Brian Greenberg, a University of Delaware historian, chooses mid-nineteenth century Albany for a critical assessment of class and community in industrializing America. At first glance the upstate New York capital does not look like a promising locale, but as late as 1860 the former fur-trading post stood thirteenth in America's hierarchy of cities, and its administrative and commercial functions were supplemented twenty years later by some 800 manufactories whose size was slightly above the national average. Before the rise of Chicago, Albany was a leading centre of meat-packing, its stoves were famous, and at one time its shopcrafts boasted being "the most extensive railway establishment in the country." The city, however "failed to generate truly large-scale manufacturing, and by the 1880s, important segments of Albany's economy were under great pressure from competing cities." Such patterns of urban growth, decline, and competition across the sprawling expanse of North America would have major impacts on class formation and working-class effectiveness which remain, perhaps, inadequately studied. The removal of New York Central railway work by the Vanderbilt monopoly from Albany, for example, blunted the militancy of shopcraft workers who were pioneers of the Eight Hour struggle fourteen years before Haymarket. Somewhat analogous was the situation of another leading sector of Albany labour, the iron moulders, who attempted to overcome the evils of competition through a series of local co-operative ventures. There were no simple solutions, however, to the industrial stagnation correctly described by Albany leaders as the "danger that menaces the working man as well as the rest of the community."

Greenberg's site and periodization — 1850-1884 — offers an outlook on the world of an "early" industrialism directed by entrepreneurs and local elites firmly rooted in their communities. The essential context of such a political economy was actually pre-industrial, and though Greenberg's paradigm of "class versus community" loyalties or consciousness owes much to orthodox Marxism, he also finds insights in the writings of the pre-industrial observer, Alexis de Toqueville. De Toqueville believed that the primary ameliorative

influence on American individualism was a bourgeois imperative he called the popular principle of "self-interest rightly understood." The author does not cite this passage from *Democracy in America* but discussed in considerable detail the thrust of voluntaristic activities led by Albany's middle-class leaders. Three chapters on the penitentiary, fraternal societies, and organized religion make clear that this class left little to chance or the unseen hand, but was ideologically and materially dedicated to the erection of a pervasive structure of community control. Greenberg disputes the conventional wisdom of consensus historians that the institutional effort was directed primarily against the immigrant; rather, he argues, it was an exercise in class relations. One group in Albany, the Catholic Irish, potentially lay outside of its direct purview. Nevertheless, the secular and religious leadership of the Irish community wanted nothing so much as to buy into the local establishment, and successfully did so, a strain of nativism notwithstanding.

Greenberg's sources may be skewed against an optimistic appraisal of working-class autonomy in Albany, but the historical cause is also the effect. Albany never became a particularly strong labour or radical town, and hence we view day-to-day events in the community largely through the prism of two political newspapers, the Democratic *Argus* and the Republican *Evening Journal*. Far from unconcerned with the problems and prejudices of the popular classes, both elite factions were often preoccupied with the task of emasculating free labour and social-republican sentiment among native-born workers, and incorporating the immigrant into their version of Americanism: if need be by the unwilling and opportunistic embrace of such a cause as the Fenian terrorist raids upon the Dominion of Canada. The last of Greenberg's eight chapters (oddly arranged as the final section of a three-part study) examines a moment of working-class political mobilization, following protests against unemployment and the railway strikes of the mid-1870s, around the single issue of prison contract labour. The greed of one capitalist-bureaucratic cabal goaded the working class into apparently successful democratic action (in the referendum, contract labour was defeated by a solid state-wide margin and a vote of 10:1 against in Albany.) The agitation, however, bypassed the "wages system," embraced "honest" or competitive employers, and most saliently, was co-opted by the Albany branch of Tammany Hall. The consequence of two and a half decades of social change in Albany was the triumph of the Democratic Party: "In Albany as elsewhere workers consistently failed to show in their political behaviour the class consciousness that marked their economic actions." "Many" Albany workers, Greenberg concludes, "still sought an alternative to capitalist industrialization," but they neither found nor founded a concrete expression of their aspiration. This is essentially, then, a study in hegemony.

Not surprisingly, mid-century Albany resonates with ante-bellum experience. The faster-growing and eventually much-

larger city of Detroit represented a post-Civil War future more pregnant with possibilities for the American working class. The Detroit of 1875-1900 studied by University of Pittsburgh historian Richard Oestreicher was not yet the motor city. But its seeds were being sown by a variety of light and heavy industries, including the railcar manufacturing plants denied to the boosters of Albany. The issue of "class versus community" was not central in this cradle of monopoly capitalism, home to a vast, ethnically polygot, and in American terms, politically radical proletariat. Internal loci of solidarity and fragmentation are the stated focus of the work, which also contains a large measure of fairly traditional political labour history. As Montgomery states in his dustjacket comment, the author links "questions emphasized by the more recent trends in social history to the issues of the older historiography" concerned with the evolution of American trade unions and the demise of the radical mass movement of the 1880s, the Knights of Labour. Detroit makes a good deal of sense in this context. During the 1870s, organized socialism had a higher electoral and political profile in Detroit than it would under Eugene Debs, and these early socialists, to whose record Oestreicher has made a major contribution, played a catalytic role in stimulating the Knights' activities. At the time of the "Great Upheaval" in 1886, the Knights and trade unions had a combined strength of 13,000 in Detroit, a percentage of the workforce unmatched until the non-comparable situation of the UAW-CIO in the 1930s, a mass strike engaged at least 5,000, and a workingmen's party virtually swept the state elections. At the most radical end of the spectrum was the Detroit workers' militia, drilling in anticipation of an imminent final conflict.

Oestreicher has examined a rich documentary record of the Detroit working class and movement, including a systematic reading of the German-language press which compels him to dismiss the sentimental notion of ethnic community solidarity. Labour-socialist Germans studiously boycotted the ostentatious German Days sponsored by the elite, but, the author reminds us, were no less German for that. Typical of the feel the author has gained for his subjects, in the course of what must have been heroic research, is his use of individual personalities to illustrate communal themes in a structurally and culturally divided working class: the native-American printer A. M. Dewey, the German socialist Robert Reitzel, the heretical Polish priest Dominik Kolasinski, the dissident Irish tribune Daniel Tindall, and others. As in the Albany study, the Irish-American community does not come off very well by the yardstick of labour radicalism, yet Oestreicher seems to share with Greenberg the fatal illusion that nationalism had a genuine potential for freeing Irish Americans from the grip of conservative ethnic leaders. In painting a comprehensive portrait of Detroit's nineteenth century working class, aided by Olivier Zunz's research into the manuscript census, and of the component parts of the labour and radical movements,

Oestreicher has set, however, a new standard of excellence in local social and working-class history.

Returning to Montgomery's point of linking social to institutional labour history in a local setting, we suspect that the Detroit study goes about as far as this route may take us. The author offers a rich description of the Knights and their diverse constituency, and quite obviously, the experience of the movement captures the dialectic between working-class solidarity and fragmentation on economic, cultural, and ideological lines. One is increasingly tempted, however, to assert that the rise and fall of the Knights was an autonomous political event with sociological roots and (above all) consequences, but not easily amenable to a sociological explanation, least of all on a local level. Oestreicher could have profited by the reading of the fine Canadian study, Kealey and Palmer's *Dreaming of What Might Be*, that edges toward this conclusion. In triumph and defeat the Knights had a character that defies the canons of Marxist orthodoxy, but so too have all important labour movements. A fragmented social formation was equally responsible for its rise as its demise. The fact is that the Knights *were* destroyed from within and without, and left in their wake the weakest working-class movement in the Western world, the sectional and exclusivist American Federation of Labour.

Virtually all of the local studies of the nineteenth century industrial city that have emerged over the last 10 to 15 years are a critique of the Commons or Perlman schools of U.S. labour history. These schools had either the vice or the virtue of attempting to link contemporary social reality and political dilemmas with the labour past. The "new" urban history may have started out with similar intentions, but has arrived at a different place. As the mysterious Mr. Quin once remarked, "There is no atmosphere in the present," and as the present situation for American workers and their communities goes from bad to worse, a far-reaching synthesis of what has happened remains elusive.

Allen Seager  
Department of History  
Simon Fraser University

---

**Metropolitan Regions or Sunbelt Cities?  
The Fall of Houston and Denver, the "Resurgence"  
of New York and Boston**

Sternlieb, George. *Patterns of Development*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy, 1986. Pp. xv, 289. Tables, index. \$22.95 (U.S.).

McComb, David G. *Galveston: A History*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. Pp 267. Maps, index.

Bernard, Richard M. and Bradley R. Rice, editors. *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983. Pp. x, 346. Maps. \$9.95 paper (U.S.).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s journalists, marketing consultants, and many scholars enthusiastically celebrated the success of the sunbelt; Houston and Denver competed, at the time, to be that belt's "golden buckle." Fiscal crisis and job loss meanwhile gave a sad, nostalgic twist to the title of journalist Ken Auletta's 1979 book on New York, *The Streets Were Paved With Gold*. Just a few years later, something over a third of the new office space in Houston, Denver, and many other recently booming cities was empty (it was said that there was more empty office space in Houston than total office space in Philadelphia, whose metropolitan region houses many more people than Houston's). And suddenly, in the mid- and late-1980s, property values have skyrocketed not only in Manhattan but throughout the metropolitan New York-New Jersey-Connecticut region — and per capita incomes are higher and rising more rapidly in Boston's New England than anywhere else in the United States.

This sudden reversal has exposed the shallow basis on which many economic consultants operate, confused journalists, and thrown a curve at historians. Here we have a case where it really does seem useful to step back from the headlines. George Sternlieb, the enterprising director of the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University, laments that press deadlines and client needs all too often force experts in his field to focus exclusively on "current trauma," thus losing the "broader perspective" that history makes possible (p. 3). If we look at a longer period of time and a wider range of phenomena, we may in fact be able to make sense of the episodic shifts that have caught so many — hard headed bankers and real estate developers no less than superficial pundits — by surprise.

We should start with the long-term rise to dominance of metropolitan regions as the basic form of human settlement throughout the United States. Half of the people in the United States lived in metropolitan regions by 1940, but *all* of the population increase of the next thirty-five years went to these great cities and their surrounding suburbs and satellites. In 1940 the great metropolitan regions were without exception located along the north and middle Atlantic coast, on the Great Lakes, the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers, and on the Pacific: by 1975 Houston, Dallas, Miami, Atlanta, Tampa, and Phoenix had joined the list, earning well-deserved reputations for rapid growth and optimistic business communities. It was in this context that so many observers proclaimed the "rise of the sun belt."

There followed an interesting debate about the reasons for the "sun belt's" success and particularly for the rapid growth of its cities after 1940. Richard Bernard, Bradley Rice and their colleagues emphasized political factors, and