

Honey, Michael K. *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers*. (The Working Class in American History). Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Pp xiii, 364. 10 black and white photographs, index. \$49.95 (US) (cloth); \$17.95 (US) (paperback)

Thomas, Richard W. *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915–1945*. (Blacks in the Diaspora). Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1992. Pp. xiv, 365. 13 black and white photographs, index. \$47.50 (cloth)

Peter Rachleff

Volume 23, numéro 2, march 1995

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016643ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016643ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Rachleff, P. (1995). Compte rendu de [Honey, Michael K. *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers*. (The Working Class in American History). Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Pp xiii, 364. 10 black and white photographs, index. \$49.95 (US) (cloth); \$17.95 (US) (paperback) / Thomas, Richard W. *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915–1945*. (Blacks in the Diaspora). Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1992. Pp. xiv, 365. 13 black and white photographs, index. \$47.50 (cloth)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 23(2), 60–62. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016643ar>

The common thread that runs through the stories of the different national contexts is that ideals tend to be shaped, often beyond recognition, by political, social, and economic realities. In Germany, for example, Gerhard Fehl shows that the Garden City was used by the Nazis as a means of ordering and controlling space in the course of wartime territorial expansion. Taking advantage of an earlier technocratic turn in planning, and employing the talents of Walter Christaller, they used the Garden City as the basis for a new regional planning that ruthlessly manipulated populations to abstract technical and nationalist ends. In the case of Japan, Shunichi Watanabe shows that the Garden City was not received in that country as an intact set of ideas with easily usable mechanisms. Instead, consistent with the interests of a powerful landed elite, Garden City ideas reached their fullest expression in a handful of middle-class suburbs. While there was much discussion of using the Garden City to achieve substantial reforms in urban morphology, its main impact was to form the basis of planning measures designed to rationalize new suburban land use. In the case of Australia, Robert Freestone shows that the absence of a need for decentralization and the relative paucity of the poor urban living conditions that spawned the Garden City movement in Britain meant that, parallel to the Canadian case, direct Garden City influences were confined largely to housing design and resource town development.

The national coverage is uneven. With four chapters exclusively or predominantly on Britain, two on the United States, and one each on France, Japan, Germany, and Australia, there would have been room to consolidate the British and U.S. cases into two or three, instead of six chapters, leaving room for more national cases. It might be argued, however, that there remain no national cases sufficiently well-studied to merit

similar treatment. In Canada, for instance, the Garden City direct influences on the urban fabric were few; and few scholars have attempted to understand the country planning history through the prism of the Garden City, and fewer still to identify and understand the specific examples of Garden City ideas in action. That means there is little literature to form the basis for a summary of Canada encounter along lines similar to the essays in this volume.

Nevertheless, there is at least a need here for some attempt to review the national cases that are as yet little-studied. In particular, I suspect that there has been an influence on less-developed countries, which goes unmentioned here. Indeed, if there is a future for Howard's program of land reform, decentralization, and small communities in which residence and industry are balanced, it is in those developing countries suffering from the effects of the emergence of enormous primate cities. Of course, any such countries that tried to adopt the Garden City would run up against many of the problems faced earlier this century in Britain and elsewhere, particularly the problem of building adequate and affordable working-class housing where capital is scarce and wages low.

On the whole, *The Garden City: Past, Present, and Future* is a valuable primer on an important movement in international urban planning. It is not, however, good value for money. Its hefty price tag puts the book out of reach for all but the most devoted specialists, and even, probably, for many Canadian university libraries, given current financial realities. This in itself belies some of the contributors' apparent hopes that the Garden City will once again be a widely embraced popular movement.

Matt Sendbuehler
Department of Geography
McMaster University

Honey, Michael K. *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers. (The Working Class in American History)*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Pp xiii, 364. 10 black and white photographs, index. \$49.95 (US) (cloth); \$17.95 (US) (paperback).

Thomas, Richard W. *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945. (Blacks in the Diaspora)*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1992. Pp. xiv, 365. 13 black and white photographs, index. \$47.50 (cloth).

Twentieth century African-American urban history continues to be one of the most dynamic fields in U.S. history. Both of these books engage and expand the existing frameworks in this field, offer new structures, and provide considerable food for thought.

Initially, the concepts of northern migration and "ghettoization" dominated this topic. Historians focussed on the forces, such as banking, real estate interests, home owner associations, and municipal governments, and the processes, such as red-lining, restrictive covenants, block busting and political gerrymandering, which literally shaped the contours of black urban communities. In this framework, powerful white institutions and organizations were the actors, while powerless African-Americans were the acted upon.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the impact of the Civil Rights Movement seeped into historians' consciousness and subtly—but significantly—altered the

framework of African-American urban history. In his path-breaking *Black Chicago*, Allan Spear analyzed the "institutional" as well as the "physical" ghetto, the rich associational and organizational life that African-Americans developed in the urban North, within the confines constructed by white economic and political agencies. Spear's contribution placed African-Americans on the stage of urban history as players in the game, even if they could not control the cards which were dealt them.

Ironically, the next shift in the field was contributed by Spear's student, Joe William Trotter, Jr., in *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat*. Trotter argued that historians' emphasis on ghettoization had blinded them to an even more important dynamic element in the African-American urban experience, the transformation of a largely rural peasantry into an industrial working-class, with consequent changes in their culture and consciousness. While Trotter did not deny the salience of ghettoization—indeed several chapters of his book explored the processes of neighborhood formation—he urged historians to look more carefully at the processes of class formation.

Since the publication of *Black Milwaukee*, several other studies have deepened our understanding of the inter-relationship of migration, urbanization, ghettoization and proletarianization. In *Making Their Own Way*, Peter Gottlieb analyzed the migration process itself, both from the South to Pittsburgh and returning from Pittsburgh to the South. Gottlieb used company employment records and insights drawn from anthropology to explore which family members migrated, how their migration was an extension of their seasonal searches for wage labor, and how they developed a commitment to the industrial work world of Pittsburgh. James Grossman, in *The Land of Hope*,

argued that the relationship between the middle-class and working-class was a source of tension and disunity in the formation of Chicago's African-American community. Gottlieb's and Grossman's studies emphasized African-American agency and gave relatively equal weight to the dynamics of both neighborhood and class formation.

The two books being reviewed here build on this common foundation. Michael Honey's *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights* explores class dynamics in unprecedented detail, probing African-American workers' relations with employers, politicians, the black middle-class, and white workers. From the beginning, they are depicted as active agents rather than a sociological category, as the products as well as the creators of their own struggles. Moreover, the author shifts historians' attention from the urban North to the urban South. There is a specificity to the Southern scene—the lack of political rights, the ever-present threat of physical violence, the different patterns of industrialization and the lower levels of factory employment—which plays an important role in shaping the context for African-American working-class formation and struggle.

Within this context, African-American workers were hardly passive victims of institutionalized racism. Honey carefully details their efforts—along the busy Memphis waterfront, in a major Firestone tire factory, in cotton and oil-seed processing plants, in wood-working shops, and in a host of small factories—to organize. He also shows that their organizing efforts were inseparable from their struggles against racism in the workplace, and that workplace organization quickly brought their struggles from the workplace into the community and the political sphere. While some of these struggles elicited the support of white labor activists or even white workers at large, others were fought against the re-

sistance of white workers and traditional white union leaders.

Indeed, it was these limitations internal to the labor movement, Honey shows, which held African-American workers back from being able to shape their world in ways they would have preferred. Yet, even those struggles which failed provided the experience, the social networks, and the vision which would inform the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and would make it a vehicle which would carry the aspirations of African-American workers closer to their goals. *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights* and Earl Lewis' *In Their Own Interests* are suggestive of another new direction for the field of African-American urban history—towards a comparative framework that juxtaposes the Northern experience with the Southern. Such a framework may enable historians to better understand the role of the church, the importance of familial networks, and the linkages between countryside and city.

Richard Thomas' *Life For Us Is What We Make It* stands in a different relationship to existing historical frameworks and makes an explicit argument for a framework of "community building" to supersede and supplant even the most sophisticated versions of the earlier models of ghettoization and proletarianization. He contends that the resulting picture is more "organic" (xii) and "holistic" (xiii) than those constructed through earlier frameworks.

Thomas' work carefully explores the development of both the African-American middle-class and the working-class. He argues that at different times each of these classes played a dominant role. In the 1920s, on the one hand, newly developed black businesses, grounded in the patronage of newly arrived migrants working in the auto industry, stepped forward to set the pace and pattern for the

community as a whole. During the depression of the 1930s, on the other hand, community dynamism grew from the industrial unions of the United Auto Workers and the CIO, supplanting, at least temporarily, the middle-class leadership of the 1920s.

These and other elements of "community-building" are suggestive, but *Life For Us Is What We Make It* does not always provide sufficient evidence to support its contention that it offers the new framework for African-American urban history. Much more work on the actual interaction between the African-American middle-class and working-class is still needed, for instance, and not just on the specific activities of each class.

In sum, both of these studies contribute to the evolving framework of African-American urban history—*Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights* by adding new layers to our understanding of black working-class activism and *Life For Us Is What We Make It* by offering a model of "community-building" to supersede both "ghettoization" and "proletarianization". Each also suggests further directions for the field—into comparative studies of Northern and Southern experiences and into the dynamics of middle-class/working-class relationships within the African-American community.

Peter Rachleff
Department of History
Macalester College
St. Paul, Minnesota

Jablonsky, Thomas J. *Pride in the Jungle: Pride and Everyday Life in Back of the Yards Chicago Creating the North American Landscape*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Pp. xviii, 190. Numerous black and white plates, maps, tables, references, index. \$38.50 (US).

Pride in the Jungle is a fascinating account of "everyday life" in Chicago's Back of the Yards district during the inter-war period. This book's great strength is that it succeeds in being all things to all people. It is social history because it uses primary data from archival sources to describe the working class and the development of its social institutions. It is historical geography because of its emphasis on place and spatiality and its rich illustration with maps showing the district's changing social geography. It is ethnography because of its descriptions of living conditions and attitudes towards acculturation, its family and neighbourhood scale of analysis and heavy reliance on some eighty-five oral histories. And it is ethnology because of its comparative treatment of the many community studies undertaken by University of Chicago academics who explored and observed Back of the Yards as a "human zoo ... to see what the big city could do to the oppressed." (126) Based on cataloguing-in-publication data, the book is classified as Local History (F 548.5) but it could just as easily find its way onto the order list for Anthropology, Sociology, Geography or Urban Studies.

Pride in the Jungle tells how the notorious Back of the Yards neighbourhood developed just outside the Union Stock Yards, some six miles South-west of downtown Chicago. Hemmed in by railway tracks, packinghouses and the stockyards themselves, the district was distinct and isolated from adjacent communities. Back of the Yards was populated mainly by Eastern European

immigrants arriving from 1890 to 1914. It became infamous as one of the worst American immigrant slums and the setting of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). By the First World War the district was home for some 60,000, more than half born overseas. In a sense this is the scholarly sequel to *The Jungle*, telling us what became of Jurgis Rudkus (the Lithuanian protagonist) and family, the streets they called home and the unified community they forged from this multicultural corner of Chicago.

The book is organized according to both a sociospatial framework and a temporal sequence of events. It opens with the development of North America's first great stockyard district and the evolution of an urban industrial landscape in the closing years of the Civil War based on Western cattle borne East by steam and steel. Large scale slaughter, butchering, and rendering brought health hazards and pollution stemming from byproducts: manure, offal and odours. The book then turns to massive immigration from Ireland, Eastern Europe, and Mexico that forever changed the ethnic geography of the urban Midwest. With the spatial and historical context established, the remainder of the book deals with the unfolding of the community in an "outward-spiraling spatial sequence" beginning with the family, social institutions tied closely to individual and family life (the household and street), the larger community (churches, schools and parks), and finally a grassroots community organization: Back of the Yards Neighbourhood Council. Paralleling the outward spiral in social and spatial scale is the district's historical development beginning with the establishment of the Union Stock Yards in 1865 and culminating with a brief postscript to consider the post World War II period. The result is a vivid account of what life was like and how places were shaped in the working class immigrant neighbourhoods of Chicago during the Great Depression.