

Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the editors of *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Poverty, Ethnicity, and the American City, 1840-1925: Changing Conceptions of the Slum and the Ghetto by David Ward

Review by: David M. Scobey

Source: *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Summer, 1990), pp. 167-170

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/204944>

Accessed: 28-10-2016 18:04 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the editors of *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, The MIT Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*

tegrative features vis à vis the subsequent and more exploitatively fragmented world of rental housing and wage labor, it was both sexist and ageist (my words, not hers). Yet in the time of transition to rental housing and wage labor (1820 to 1840), she indicates, an opportunity to create a better housing world had been lost because land was commodified and not seized as a public good. Blackmar touches on this possibility only briefly, citing editorialists and activists who skirted on such issues. But clearly, in the context of her larger argument, such a lost opportunity could not have happened without a complete transformation of all property ownership, for to link real property to so many other things it is necessary to demonstrate its centrality and lack of autonomy. Thus she does not push the lost opportunity notion very far.

In a sense, her posing an alternative route for home ownership raises one of several analytic problems with Blackmar's study. First, it is not very plausible that in a capitalist world real property's structural development would differ all that much from other forms of property. Is there an explanatory problem with real property? I doubt it. Second, as one follows the creation of New York's rental housing market, one must struggle to remember that workers in other American cities could continue to buy their own houses; yet in those cities virtually all of the transitional phenomena addressed by Blackmar (for example, the separation of residence and workplace) also occurred. How could housing have been the nexus of the transformation in New York but not, say, in Poughkeepsie? Third, the high density of New York City raises a similar analytic problem: how dense is too dense? If the city's density was/is truly terrible, a day's walk solved/solves the problem. We know that Americans were highly predisposed to moving; a high proportion of artisans tramped before settling down, and many more tramped during economic crises; they could have left (and often did leave) New York City. That more did not reflects some positive attraction of the city, in spite of its awful housing. The people who lived in the housing which Blackmar analyzes were not trapped, at least relative to housing tenure—owning, leasing, or renting.

Blackmar's research leaves us much richer for the wealth of information that she has brought to bear on housing, but the central questions about housing in the American city are yet to be formulated.

Eric H. Monkkonen
University of California, Los Angeles

Poverty, Ethnicity, and the American City, 1840–1925: Changing Conceptions of the Slum and the Ghetto. By David Ward (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989) 263 pp. \$39.50 cloth \$13.95 paper

Ward, an urban geographer, has made a welcome foray into intellectual history with this account of American “conceptions of the slum and the

ghetto.” In so doing, he opens a series of important dialogues: thematically, between the material shape of the urban environment and its ideological representation; methodologically, between geographical and historical analysis; and theoretically, between positivist social science and its critics on the academic left. As a historical survey, Ward’s book succeeds admirably, offering an instructive overview of middle-class attitudes and anxieties toward urban poverty and environmental disorder over the past century and a half. As an instance of interdisciplinary dialogue, however, it finally fails; but the implications of Ward’s project go far beyond the particular story which he tells.

That story is founded on a key insight into the urban discourse of middle-class Americans. The slum and the ghetto, Ward argues, have long served as “ideological sites” where reformers, planners, researchers, and other outside observers constructed causal explanations linking economic inequality, social heterogeneity, and the urban environment. He traces the genealogy of “this essentially geographic formulation of poverty” through three eras of urban reform: from Victorian moralism through the environmental accounts of Gilded Age tenement and charity reformers to the surveys and regulatory programs of turn-of-the-century Progressive experts (ix). By the 1920s, these activists’ debates gave way to the detached investigations of urban sociology and social history. Academic urbanism, Ward contends, marked race and ethnicity as the primary axes of social difference in the American inner city; ethnocultural “variables” were used to explain how different groups handled the problems of life in the slums.

For readers acquainted with the historiography of urban reform, Ward’s periodization and many of his themes will be familiar.¹ Nonetheless, the old story takes on new aspects when seen through a geographer’s eye. Ward is acute, for instance, on the extent to which reformers misunderstood (and mystified) the actual environmental conditions and economic processes embedded in their image of the slum. He also provides the best synthesis that I have seen, at once lucid and subtle, of recent research into mass immigration to the United States (a primary focus of his own work). Even in his unaccustomed role of intellectual historian, Ward exposes many neglected facets of his subject. His attention to the “hereditarian” and “racialist” strands of reform ideology; his emphasis on the fear of “contagion” in Victorian conceptions of the slum; and his complex comparisons of race and ethnicity in recent scholarship—all help to make the book a comprehensive and nuanced survey of the evolution of urban reform and urban sociology. If, as the saying goes, “God is in the details,” then *Poverty, Ethnicity, and the American City* has much that is divine.

There is, moreover, a tacit message in the details—one that is surprisingly self-critical of the social-science tradition from which Ward

1 See, especially, Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978).

himself comes. The turn toward intellectual history is a turn away from the positivist investigation of functional, economic, and residential patterns which has characterized the most influential urban geography, including much of Ward's own scholarship.² Moreover, the book repeatedly underscores the persistence with which American reformers and researchers "obscured the critical issue of poverty itself," displacing the economic causes of the urban crisis onto environmentalist or ethnocultural accounts of the pathologies of the poor (75). This privileging of ecological and ethnic categories of explanation has characterized urban studies since the heyday of the Chicago School (1910s to 1920s). Thus it is hard not to sense a strain of methodological stocktaking, even intellectual autobiography, embedded in the tale of reform and research. And one is tempted to read the tale as a tacit call for—or at least a gesture toward—some new model of urban scholarship, less wedded to the behaviorist and pluralist assumptions of mainstream social science.

If this supposition is true, *Poverty, Ethnicity, and the American City* succeeds less well as a theoretical model than as narrative. For Ward replicates important elements of the social-science discourse, the limits of which he is exposing. Even as he points to the erasure of socioeconomic and power relations in favor of ecological and ethnocultural accounts of the slum, the structure of his own chapters, each with subheadings on "The environment defined" and "The residents defined," repeats that erasure. The result is a curiously inert treatment of changing conceptions of the slum and ghetto: a chronicle of change without the dynamic concatenation of motives, interests, relationships, and conditions which is the stuff of historical explanation.

Although Ward succeeds in engaging geography with history, he fails to incorporate the defining habit of historical explanation: attention to the dynamic analysis of human agency. He especially fails to incorporate the treatment of agency offered by the most influential recent critics of mainstream social science: neo-Marxists. The book would have benefited from the insights of new Marxist scholarship in geography and history: Castells' account of the ideology of urban studies; Harvey's analysis of the effect of capitalism on urban spatial change; and the exploration of class and power relations which has preoccupied Montgomery and other labor historians.³ Ward notes the currency of the

2 For examples of Ward's scholarship in this tradition, see Ward, *Cities and Immigrants: A Geography of Change in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1971); "The Industrial Revolution and the Emergence of Boston's Central Business District," *Economic Geography*, XLII (1966) 152–171; "The Internal Spatial Structure of Immigrant Residential Districts in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Geographical Analysis*, 1 (1969) 337–353. In the quoted phrase, Ward is referring to turn-of-the-century housing reformer Jacob Riis.

3 See, for instance, Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977); David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (Chicago, 1982); *idem*, *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore, 1985); David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor* (New York, 1987).

Marxist analysis from the start: “. . . recent discussions of the slum and the ghetto . . . confront the degree to which the environmental constraints and social problems of the inner city are integral parts of the structural inequalities of the capitalist political economy” (3). Yet these concerns hardly ever make their way into the heart of his argument; within the book’s theoretical dialogue, Marxism is an indispensable, yet marginalized, voice.

The neglect of such themes—agency, socioeconomic power, and capitalist development—is what makes Ward’s chronicle feel inert, like a passive voice writ large. And that is a shame, because the chronicle itself is an instructive survey of urban reform and research and a shrewd critique of their assumptions. *Poverty, Ethnicity, and the American City* points toward a different set of assumptions—toward a conception of the slum and the ghetto more attuned to ideology and more embedded in social history than urban geography has generally been. Yet the book does not equip itself with the theoretical or rhetorical resources which would have helped it to embody that conception.

David M. Scobey
University of Michigan

Tejanos and the Numbers Game: A Socio-Historical Interpretation from the Federal Censuses, 1850–1900. By Arnoldo De Leon and Kenneth L. Stewart (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1989) 119 pp. \$24.95

Tejanos and the Numbers Game is a study of the nineteenth-century demographic development of Texas—particularly “the Mexican experience in Texas during the nineteenth century” (8). The data were drawn from a sample of federal census manuscripts of twenty Texas counties from 1850 to 1900. The counties were selected to represent the “three discernable geographic regions of the state” (south, central, and west) in which Mexican-Americans settled (9). The data set is impressive: 21 variables describe 101,312 individuals included in five census years (there are no 1890 data). The authors discuss patterns of immigration, occupational status and change, home and family patterns, urban/rural differences, and residential segregation for Tejanos and Anglos. Their results will be useful for scholars working on Tejano history, ethnic history, and the history of the southwest.

The theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the work are weak. The authors pose two “polar views” of Mexican-American culture, which they characterize as “cultural determinist” and “revisionist” (91). Years ago, notably in social-mobility literature, social historians recognized that cultural values cannot be inferred from census data, but