

## ESSAY REVIEW

### Industrial Philadelphia

*Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century, Essays Toward an Interdisciplinary History of the City.* Edited by THEODORE HERSHBERG. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981. xviii, 525 p. Maps, charts, tables, appendices. \$29.95.)

Anyone who has done American social history in the past decade has probably read about, listened to a paper by, tried to copy or criticize the work of the Philadelphia Social History Project. Begun in 1969 with a grant from the Center for the Study of Metropolitan Problems, National Institute of Mental Health, the project was originally designed to "determine whether the burdens and disabilities faced by black Americans were peculiar to their historical experience or simply obstacles which every immigrant group entering society had to overcome" (p. vi). Theodore Hershberg and his associates received additional grants and worked for six years to create massive computerized data bases to analyze the patterns of migration and family structure, work and residence for mid-nineteenth-century Philadelphians. Since the mid-1970s the project has expanded to address many additional questions. As Hershberg himself has noted, the mere existence of these extraordinarily detailed data, from such a variety of sources — population and manufacturing censuses, business directories, even the routes of the railroads, omnibuses, trolleys, and the location of sewage facilities — allows scholars to ask a whole variety of questions about everyday life in nineteenth-century Philadelphia.

Thus the publication of *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century* is a bit of an historical event in its own right. We have in this volume, collected for the first time, results of the project. Included are fourteen essays, seven previously published, exploring the nature of work in the manufacturing economy, the residential location and mobility of nineteenth-century Philadelphians, their family structure and the family economy, and the status and experiences of Irish, black, German and native workers. Also included are detailed descriptions of the data bases, a bibliography of other papers and research completed, and

theoretical and methodological essays on the nature of urban history and the research process. The final essay of the volume, "A Tale of Three Cities: Blacks, Immigrants, and Opportunity in Philadelphia, 1850-1880, 1930, 1970," by Theodore Hershberg, Alan Burstein, Eugene Ericksen, Stephanie Greenberg, and William Yancey is an attempt to answer the question posed in the original research: namely "were the burdens and disabilities faced by black Americans peculiar to their historical experience or were they simply obstacles which every immigrant group entering American society had to overcome?" (p. 461).

The book is an impressive document. The various essays provide a rich and detailed picture of the life of a rapidly expanding city in the mid to late nineteenth century. Between 1850 and 1890 the city of Philadelphia consolidated with the county and grew from less than half a million to a million residents. The growth was fueled by a booming and diversified manufacturing economy. Philadelphians made everything from machinery and locomotives to carpets, shoes and apparel. Half the workforce worked in manufacturing in these years; as in most American cities of the period, the boom was fueled with immigrant labor from Britain, Ireland, and Germany, as well as rural Americans seeking their fortunes. This we knew in rough outline before; what Hershberg and his co-authors have added is tremendous detail about just how people lived. Hershberg, Cox, Light and Greenfield have determined that the average Philadelphian lived within six-tenths of a mile from his work in 1850; within one mile in 1880. White-collar workers, a much smaller proportion of the workforce then, lived further away from their work than did blue-collar workers.<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Greenberg examined the relationship between the location of Philadelphia's manufacturing firms and the ethnic character of the city.<sup>2</sup> She found that, for whites, the industry that people worked in was more important in determining their neighborhood than their ethnic background. In other words, ethnic neighborhoods existed, but in the walking city were limited in their extent and concentration by the industrial opportunities around them. Bruce Laurie, Mark Schmitz, Theodore Hershberg and George Alter describe the nature of the manufacturing economy in Philadelphia in the period, and point out that the local economy included metal-working and textile factories which already were mechanized and employed large scale production methods, as well as manufactories, sweatshops, small craftsmen's shops and homework.<sup>3</sup> In fact, only one third

<sup>1</sup> "The 'Journey to Work': An Empirical Investigation of Work, Residence and Transportation, Philadelphia, 1859 and 1880."

<sup>2</sup> "Industrial Location and Ethnic Residential Patterns in an Industrializing City: Philadelphia, 1880."

<sup>3</sup> "Manufacture and Productivity: The Making of an Industrial Base, Philadelphia, 1850-1880"; and "Immigrants and Industry: The Philadelphia Experience, 1850-1880."

of the manual workers worked in true factories in 1850. Laurie *et alia* also take great pains to describe the unevenness of the mechanization of industry and the variety of types of production going on in mid-nineteenth century Philadelphia. They further note that the smaller firms were more efficient than the larger ones. In this early phase of mechanization, productivity gains made by employers who installed power-driven machinery could be eroded by bottlenecks elsewhere in the production process. And they point out that wages could be higher for "ordinary" workers in the new metal trades than they were for skilled artisans in the sweated tailoring trades or for shoemakers, bakers, or butchers.

Similar insights abound in the chapters describing family and community life during the period. Michael Haines calculated the probable income and expenditures of working-class families in Philadelphia in 1880 to determine the proportion of families facing severe poverty or economic stress.<sup>4</sup> Haines discovered that about one quarter of the families he surveyed faced such poverty; they tended to send their children to work to increase family income. John Modell, Theodore Hershberg and Frank Furstenberg describe the changes that have taken place in what they call the "transitions" from childhood to adulthood for nineteenth-century Philadelphians and twentieth-century Americans.<sup>5</sup> They point out that it took almost ten to fifteen years for the nineteenth-century Philadelphian to complete the necessary steps demarcating childhood and adulthood: leaving school, beginning work, leaving the family home, marrying, and starting a separate household. Today those transitions begin later, go on simultaneously, and are compacted into a few years.

In short, this is a volume which reflects and justifies the tremendous work that has gone into the Philadelphia Social History Project over the past twelve years. Since Hershberg is also an advocate of large-scale interdisciplinary research, the volume stands as a testimonial to the kind of sophisticated scholarship which can be produced when a group of scholars pool their interests and expertise and focus on a common site for study. In Charles Tilly's language, sociology (and economics and geography) have clearly met history in this volume, and all the disciplines should be the richer for the cross-fertilization, new insights and new methods.<sup>6</sup>

Having said all this, I would still like to criticize the Philadelphia Social History Project researchers a bit for what they have not done, and in my position of armchair critic suggest where efforts might profitably be directed.

<sup>4</sup> "Poverty, Economic Stress, and the Family in a Late Nineteenth-Century American City: Whites in Philadelphia, 1880."

<sup>5</sup> "Social Change and Transitions to Adulthood in Historical Perspective."

<sup>6</sup> Charles Tilly, *As Sociology Meets History* (New York, 1981).

In particular I think the project could profit from a return to some of the basic tenets of the historical profession — including our emphasis on narrative, telling a story, if you will, and periodization. Some examples should illustrate my concerns.

*Philadelphia*, despite its many strengths, is not the story of industrialization, family life, residential development and urban growth of nineteenth century Philadelphia. The volume does not contain a coherently organized set of themes, a theory of economic and social development, an analysis of why Philadelphia grew as it did, of what groups or individuals were instrumental in shaping the urban world. The authors can describe patterns of work, residence, family life, and group experience, but the character of their data and the diverse conceptual frames which they use preclude an integrated explanation of economic development. In short, we need a second book which provides a history of Philadelphia, and one which is more than “scaffolding.”<sup>7</sup>

Another symptom of this general problem is the overreliance on the data in determining one's research questions and in setting the time frame for analysis. The original project employed manuscript censuses — the earliest available extant sources were from 1850; the latest for 1880 (the 1890 population schedules were burned; the 1900 and 1910 schedules were not available for public use when the project began). The articles (like much social history which used manuscript census schedules) were limited by the availability of the data; the monumental efforts necessary simply to build the data bases tended to exhaust the best quantifiers and thus constrain the forms of the question asked. Forced back from the question of temporal change and periodization by the lack of or the intractability of comparable data, the PSHP articles provide a brilliant glimpse of everyday life in the mid-nineteenth century, but a much weaker image of the processes of historical change which obliterated so much of that world.

I think the limitations of the project stand out most clearly against the answer Hershberg provides to the original aim of the project: to assess the urban black experience in relation to the immigrant experience. Hershberg was originally correct to choose Philadelphia as the site for this type of study. After all, Philadelphia had the largest urban black population in the North in the nineteenth century. The community had agitated for abolition before the Civil War; there were a whole series of studies of the nature of the community — from the federal censuses to abolitionist and Quaker censuses to W.E.B. DuBois's pathbreaking study, *The Philadelphia Negro*.<sup>8</sup> The

<sup>7</sup> Sam Bass Warner, Jr., “If All the World Were Philadelphia: A Scaffolding for Urban History, 1774–1930,” *American Historical Review*, 74 (October 1968), 26–43; Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (Philadelphia, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> (Philadelphia, 1899).

PSHP has made good use of this data and accumulated knowledge: five of the fourteen essays deal directly with the black experience in nineteenth-century Philadelphia; the remaining essays also contain material comparing the black and the white experience.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the project's ultimate answer to the question of the comparability of the black and white experience in Philadelphia is wanting. Hershberg and his colleagues argue in "A Tale of Three Cities" that the "twin structural advantages" of abundant jobs and residential neighborhoods near those jobs made it possible for European immigrants to move into the city, get a permanent foothold in the growing industrial economy, and over a generation or two achieve stable working-class and ultimately middle-class status. Blacks, on the other hand, faced severe racism in the nineteenth century which prevented their participation in the growing industrial sector; a declining city economy frustrated their efforts when they finally did manage to move into the city in large numbers in the twentieth century. Thus the black ghettos of the late twentieth century were very different from the ghettos which existed for the southern and eastern European migrants of the early twentieth century, and completely different from the non-segregated city of the Irish and German immigrants of the nineteenth. All this is on the whole true.

Yet it leaves open nagging questions about why blacks would migrate into a city with such dismal job and residential opportunities in the first place. What emerges from the "tale of three cities" is a vision of blacks as passive victims, coming to Philadelphia to work in her industries and shops at a time when there were no jobs. The Irish and Germans came "at the most propitious time" (p. 484) according to Hershberg; even the eastern European immigrants moved into "ghettos of opportunity" (p. 484). But blacks came and found only "menial, domestic, and largely unskilled low-paying occupations." They now inhabit "depressed areas of a city with a declining opportunity structure" (pp. 476, 485).

The historical record frankly does not support much of this interpretation. There is a rather terrible story to the history of blacks in Philadelphia, but it is not one of passivity and helplessness. It is a story of brutal racist oppression, of struggles to stake out a decent life in urban America, and of some successes and some failures. The fact that Hershberg does not empha-

<sup>9</sup> Claudia Goldin, "Family Strategies and the Family Economy in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Role of Secondary Workers"; Theodore Hershberg, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Philadelphia: A Study of Ex-Slaves, Freeborn, and Socioeconomic Decline"; Theodore Hershberg and Henry Williams, "Mulattoes and Blacks: Intragroup Color Differences and Social Stratification in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia"; Frank Furstenberg, Jr., Theodore Hershberg and John Modell, "The Origins of the Female-Headed Black Family: The Impact of the Urban Experience"; Hershberg, Burstein, Ericksen, Greenberg, and Yancey, "A Tale of Three Cities."

size these struggles, turns, and changes indicates a major failing in the work.

In fact, blacks composed eight to nine percent of the Philadelphia population until the 1830s, when European immigrants began to move into the city in large numbers and compete with blacks for jobs. From the 1830s through the Civil War period, blacks were periodically victimized by white mobs, especially when they agitated against slavery. They lost the right to vote in 1838.<sup>10</sup> In the 1840s and again in the 1860s the black population actually declined slightly while the city as a whole was growing by leaps and bounds. This was a community under siege; the essays in this volume detailing the poverty, high mortality, and lack of job opportunity for blacks make this clear. By 1870 they composed only three percent of Philadelphia's population.

And so the situation remained until early in the twentieth century. The black community grew from 22,000 in 1870 to 63,000 as DuBois completed *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1900, but it was still less than five percent of Philadelphia's population. Even more telling as an indicator of the fate of the community in the larger city was the almost complete absence of black men from manufacturing work. In a city where forty-six percent of the workforce was in "manufacturing and mechanical industries," according to the 1900 census, only 2,000 black men, some ten percent of the black male workforce, held such jobs.

This was to change dramatically in the early twentieth century. As the "immigrant problem" began to loom larger and larger in progressive era America, employers and policy makers began to debate whether immigrant labor was as tractable and as problem free as in earlier days. And, abruptly with the start of World War I, the supply of immigrants was cut off. Employers in Philadelphia, and around the nation, had to look elsewhere for an abundant supply of cheap unskilled labor, especially after the United States entered the World War in 1917. Black workers filled the void and moved into the manufacturing jobs from which they had been excluded for so long. By 1920 there were 23,000 black men working in "manufacturing and mechanical industries"; their numbers rose to 32,000 in 1930. In short, by 1930, the census recorded forty-one percent of the black male workforce in manufacturing, as compared to forty-five percent for all men. The black community had grown to 220,000 in that year and was over eleven percent

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Laurie, *The Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia, 1980). Laurie describes the violence against blacks in Philadelphia prior to the Civil War and makes clear that the mobs sought to dislodge blacks from jobs.

of the city population.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to say that blacks had achieved parity with whites or had overcome a century of racism. Black men were concentrated in unskilled jobs in dirty and dangerous industries (construction, chemical plants, iron and steel mills), yet they clearly had moved tremendously from the situation of late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These gains were, however, virtually wiped out by the depression. Black men suffered a staggering thirty-three percent unemployment rate in the 1940 census; the number of black men in manufacturing declined precipitously.

World War II triggered another economic boom and again there were opportunities for blacks to move into new jobs. The black population grew fifty-one percent in the 1940s, and black male employment in manufacturing, an indicator of the ability of blacks to participate in the economic mainstream, grew. It continued to grow steadily through 1970, even as the size of the manufacturing sector of the economy declined. In the 1960s and especially in the 1970s, Philadelphia's manufacturing economy went into precipitous decline and blacks, as a larger proportion of the city's population, suffered accordingly.

In short we have here a very complex story. In the twentieth century alone there were two separate booms and two periods of disastrous and protracted

<sup>11</sup> This interpretation is based upon the same statistics that Hershberg et al. use in "A Tale of Three Cities," Table 5, p. 475. It differs from theirs because they have misinterpreted the 1900 and 1930 published census data in a rather major way. In particular they have radically underestimated the penetration of blacks into manufacturing jobs because they have confused the occupational, industrial, and sectoral categories of the census. The error is greatest for the 1930 census. In that year the census reported 41 percent of black men working in "manufacturing and mechanical industries." The PSHP reports 12.6 percent of all blacks in "manufacturing." This huge discrepancy results from the fact that the PSHP removed the "laborers" listed under "manufacturing and mechanical industries" and listed them in a separate category. The error is grossest for black workers (17.6 percent of the black workforce) because, as the most recent entrants into the manufacturing and construction economy, they tended to be in unskilled jobs. Almost 11,000 black men were laborers in building construction. The PSHP did not place skilled workers in construction in a separate sectoral category. They thus included all the 32,000 + skilled construction workers, for example, carpenters, masons, and plumbers, as "manufacturing" workers. Since whites dominated these jobs, they overstated the representation of whites in "manufacturing."

This error of misreading census categories also shows up in their "owners and executives" category. The PSHP has classified the "manufacturers" as "owners and executives" for the 1900 and 1930 data. Since the term did not mean "large manufacturer" but merely an artisan or a contractor, and for Philadelphia primarily identified garment sweaters, the PSHP reports that rather silly result that 12.6 percent of the Russian immigrants in 1900, and 13.6 percent of the foreign-born in 1930 were "owners and executives," as compared to 7-8 percent of all workers for Philadelphia in 1970 (see tables 5 and 9). For a discussion of census categories, see Margo Conk, *The United States Census and Labor Force Change* (Ann Arbor, 1980). For a discussion of the blacks working in industry in the 1920s, see Sterling G. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker* (New York, 1931).

economic decline. These economic cycles, I would suggest, have had an enduring effect on the ultimate opportunities of Philadelphia's blacks and their ability to translate an economic toehold into a foothold and then into true mobility. For ultimately, one must explain why Philadelphia's blacks, like blacks in so many other American cities, put up with extreme residential segregation in the worst neighborhoods, endured race riots (in Philadelphia in 1918, 1944, and 1964) and still kept coming. I would suggest that the periodization of Philadelphia's development into "industrializing," "industrial," and "post-industrial" phases (corresponding to the three waves of urban migrants: Irish and Germans; southern and eastern Europeans; and blacks [pp. 481-82]) obscures the actual experiences of Philadelphia's workers and points one in the wrong direction. For though blacks may not be the "last of the immigrants" and do face historic patterns of racism which are different from the discrimination faced by European urban migrants, it is little comfort to today's black teenagers to tell them that they are in the "wrong areas of the wrong city at the wrong time" (p. 462). If the historical record tells us anything about how previous generations of Americans dug themselves out of that quandary, it indicates that the migrants struggled continually for security. It also indicates that upward mobility for urban migrants depended upon overall national prosperity, and upon government regulation of the labor market when mobility prospects dimmed. In the twentieth century, immigration restriction, the Wagner Act, the Social Security system, and the Civil Rights laws provided the regulatory underpinning which made mobility possible. And all of these "reforms" were the result of political mobilization of the groups and classes concerned — in other words, of conscious historical action by workers, businessmen, immigrants, the unemployed, and minorities. Such changes should not merely be relegated to the role of "background" or "context" of the "processes" of work, space, family and group experience. Rather they are the stuff of which history is actually made. It is impossible, for example, to understand the timing of the black migrations without knowing of the groundswell of opposition against immigration during and after World War I.

Hershberg noted in the introduction to his section on "Urban as Process and History and Policy" that the PSHP has recently moved its institutional base from the University of Pennsylvania's Department of History to its School of Public and Urban Policy. The researchers hope to contribute to social policy debates and try to correct the "terribly distorting ahistorical focus" (p. 458) of contemporary social science. This move is to be applauded. Nevertheless, the project must itself develop a richer sense of historical change, and return to a closer reading of the actual events of Philadelphia's



development. Historians are trained to explain how conjunctures of events change the rules of the game. If we contribute anything to public policy debates, we should explain how wars and social movements, and cycles of economic boom and bust, alter the ways we all experience "work," "space," "family," and "group" life.

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