REVIEW ESSAY

THE BEGINNINGS OF A RENAISSANCE
Black Migration, the Industrial Order, and the Search for Power

CAROLE MARKS, *Farewell — We're Good and Gone: The Great Migration.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989. Pp. x, 209, $37.50 cloth, $12.95 paperback.

JAMES R. GROSSMAN, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. Pp. xiii, 384, $29.95 cloth.

Intrigued by the redistribution of one-sixth of the nation's Afro-American population between 1900 and 1920, scholars and social commentators have long disputed the causes and the effects of the First Great Migration. Writing radically different — but complementary — books, historical sociologist Carole Marks and social historian James R. Grossman have joined the debate. Determined to fill significant lacunae in the historiography, the two have contributed a much-needed theoretical and conceptual sophistication, although their respective interpretations are not flawless. In addition, Marks's *Farewell — We're Good and Gone* and Grossman's *Land of Hope* demonstrate the myriad ways in which African Americans struggled to empower themselves in the context of an industrializing America.

Marks's determination to correct several perceived misinterpretations is carefully delineated in her introduction. She writes, "Three major propositions will be advanced in this work that contradict much that has been written about the migration in the past" (p. 3). First, the majority of migrants who settled in the urban North had prior experience as urban, nonagricultural laborers. Second, southern industrial development displaced many black workers; migrants, therefore, sought improved wages and a new niche in the

JOURNAL OF URBAN HISTORY, Vol. 17 No. 3, May 1991 296-302
© 1991 Sage Publications, Inc.

from the SAGE Social Science Collections. All Rights Reserved.

nation's regional economies. Third, northern industrial capitalists "orchestrated" the mobilization and movement of thousands of southern blacks.

In a spirited style Marks elevates the discussion even further. Social scientists Alejandro Portes, Edna Bonacich, and Michael Piore have produced a general theory of labor migration. Recognizing the need to pay attention to specific historical and structural conditions, nonetheless, the three agree that migrants seek more than higher wages. In the capitalist world order two spheres dominate: the core and the periphery. The former has an oversupply of capital, few natural resources, and expensive labor. The latter has limited capital, an abundance of natural resources, and a seemingly endless supply of cheap labor. When the core begins to penetrate the periphery – as it has since the dawn of capitalism – rural migrants enter the periphery, displacing previous workers by driving down wages and exacerbating unemployment. Under these conditions workers in the periphery flee, often settling in the core. Labor migration in industrial settings is explained in part by the relatively cheaper, seasoned labor from the periphery to the core.

Social historians who study the Afro-American past have generally ignored this particular literature. In bridging the two discourses Marks links the migration of thousands of blacks to the development of a capitalist world order and the attendant transfer of cheaper labor. In her view, although the migration was a self-selecting process, conditions in the South contributed to the resultant out-migration. Moreover, this movement cannot be divorced from previous shifts in populations:

> Investigation of the Great Migration also reveals the real connection between a number of seemingly disparate population movements. Many American workers, from the young girls brought from New England farms to work in the mills to the most recent migrants, have been recruited for the same purpose. All have been victims of changing economies, displaced in places of origins and inserted into places of destination only at the lowest level. All have met with ethnic antagonism and have been blamed for working for cheaper wages, for being antiunion, and for their strikebreaking activities. That they remain fighting among themselves . . . is probably key to the prosperity of our time. This was also the fate of southern black workers incorporated into the northern economy. (p. 18)

The ability to frame the black experience by tying the relocation of 1.5 million African Americans to international patterns of labor migration and domestic patterns of labor recruitment, capital consolidation, and prior participation in an urban wage economy is the signal contribution of this provocative and engagingly written study.

Chiefly concerned with the movement of hundreds of African Americans to Chicago during World War I, Grossman explores the nuances of the migration process. His is a story of how expectations, realized and unrealized, informed motivations rather than how a given urban black community was formed. In documenting that account, Grossman takes us from the rural South that produced the migrants to the urban North that attempted to absorb them. Perhaps more than Marks, he views the migration as a social movement and part of a strategy designed to enable African Americans to share the fruits of American life.

Of equal value, Grossman's study figures centrally in the renaissance of Afro-American urban history. Only a few years ago Elliott Rudwick charged that the subfield, having failed to live up to expectations, was in the doldrums.[1] Unlike slavery, which commanded the attention of a generation of scholars, resulting in the publication of several of the profession's most influential books, Afro-American urban history languished. In Rudwick's view too few scholars entertained the larger questions; others simply abandoned history altogether, substituting methodological prowess for sound historical investigation. To make a point Rudwick certainly overstated his case, but in one respect he was correct: The subfield lacked an energy, an intellectual vitality. Concern with Afro-American city dwellers, the most urbanized segment of the population by 1960, remained consigned to the periphery of history's central debates. As a consequence, intriguing questions about the relationship between power and culture in the urban-industrial context went unasked and unanswered.

Only in the last few years has the emphasis shifted and the subfield reestablished itself as a contender for the imagination of a generation of historians. Parting company with the old and even the new, Grossman eloquently centers migration in the larger story of urban history. Until recently, the ghetto perspective shaped our understanding of black urban life. In *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*, Joe W. Trotter, Jr., insisted that the ghetto synthesis has outlived its usefulness and questioned the sole reliance on such an approach.[2] Seeing an interrelationship between industrialization and urbanization, he called for a systematic study of the process of proletarianization or the making of a black industrial proletariat. Grossman pushes Trotter's critique even further:

> The community studies focus primarily on spatial and institutional development, along with the patterns of race relations that defined the ghetto; riot scholarship traces the patterns and meaning of racial conflicts that punctuated the process of Afro-American urbanization and ghetto formation. Only recently has the community-study genre moved closer to an understanding of the mi-

> grants' experience by focusing on their importance as the first Afro-American industrial working class. Still, the focus remains fixed on the community rather than on migration and adaptation as social processes. (p. 5)

Such a reconsideration, he concludes, will produce a new synthesis, one that locates the movement "within the context of southern history, class formation in the North, ghettoization, and racial ideology" (p. 6).

Grossman develops the twin themes of migration and social adaptation in his book's two sections by telling the story from the perspective of the migrants. He probes the inner world of southern blacks with much subtlety and sensitivity. Unlike quantitative historians who have been quick to dismiss that which shows no statistical significance, Grossman refuses to reject the obvious. Southern blacks envisioned a world where race was not the determining factor in structuring outcomes. It was not a new belief, nor was it a foreign belief. As a result, the language of the American self shaped motivations and became part of the cultural matrix of a people and a central element in their endeavor to empower themselves. Because scores could envision a better way, individually and collectively, they acted to fulfill those dreams.

Although the greater contextual and conceptual clarity added by both scholars to a well-developed historiography is commendable, certain questions emerge that have not been suitably answered by either author. In her efforts to say something new, at times Marks portrays the Great Migration as an event rather than a process. Instead of simply a movement northward, blacks moved from the rural to the urban and from the South to the North. Marks understands this, but at times she is too quick to abandon the ranging implications. Thus the South is considered as a sending community rather than as a sending and receiving community. Since more than 800,000 blacks migrated to southern cities between 1900 and 1920, this is a considerable slight. If one is venturing to explain the entire process, one has to consider the multiple dimensions of the migration experience.

Because she is primarily concerned with migration northward, Marks overinflates the status and importance of the labor agent and, by extension, the ability of northern industrialists to "orchestrate" the migratory process. In her estimation, "labor agents define the initial character of the migration. They are selective of populations, establishing standards of age, health and gender." Social historians who have dared to understand how African Americans empowered themselves during the industrial age will find such a claim disconcerting. Prior to the Great Migration, blacks and whites in the South moved often. Neither group required labor agents to direct them. Marks is at a loss to explain why the labor agent played such a pivotal role at this time and not before. After all, labor agents were not new; neither was the

movement of blacks from rural to urban areas or from the South to the North. Grossman, who describes the labor agent as a cog in an overall communication machinery that included relatives, friends, and black newspapers, offers a more nuanced interpretation.

More unsatisfactory is the exclusion of a cultural interpretation of the structural patterns so well documented. Were the migrants simply following the lead of labor agents and northern industrialists? Their varied expressions suggest otherwise. It would have been useful for Marks to have stopped and asked what the poem—and the book's title—"Farewell—We're Good and Gone" actually meant. We must remember that the strangling effects of Jim Crow produced both a culture of oppression and a culture of opposition. The poems were part of the latter. Etched into the sides of boxcars, published in the *Chicago Defender*, circulated by would-be migrants, they were constructed and reconstructed by each successive migrant, who in turn rewrote the poem in his or her mind's eye.[3] As part of the overall migration matrix, they highlight the relationship between power and culture in the industrial phase of American history.

Finally, Marks's view that many blacks who settled in the urban North had previous urban experience is shared by a number of historians. Peter Gottlieb stressed this point in his recent book on black migration to Pittsburgh—*Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930.* More debatable is her claim that the majority of black migrants were formerly residents of the urban South. The aggregate figures cited cannot sustain such an argument, a point she recognizes but is not restrained by. More likely, the migrants were not predominantly rural or urban. Furthermore, given the spatial layout and economic profile of many southern cities, we must ask what prior urban experience really meant.

Moving away from victimization, ghettoization, and even agency as the conceptual frame, Grossman has anticipated the collection of scholars interested in the interplay between culture and power in the industrial phase of American history.[4] This group's concerns are twofold: detailing the nuanced complexities of the interaction, with particular concern for the nonlinear features of the past, and illuminating the nonetheless singularity of the search for empowerment.

His interest in the interplay between power and culture is nicely developed in this richly illustrated study. Rejecting an earlier view that blacks were pushed by deteriorating economic conditions and a hostile racial environment or pulled by better social, political, and economic opportunities, he explores the interlocking web of social factors that produced the dramatic increase in out-migration. Afro-American institutions—family and friends,

social welfare agencies, churches, and black-owned businesses—played a central role in the transfer of large numbers of southern blacks. Once in Chicago, the migrants had to adjust to the pace and rhythm of an industrial city. Although the visible symbols of Jim Crow and the most egregious features of southern racial etiquette had disappeared, an insidious form of racism narrowed choices at work and at home.

By rejecting the myth of a monolithic black community, Grossman also underscores the nonlinear features of Afro-American history. A determination to live large in America meant that different routes to the same end produced a certain amount of intraracial conflict. Sometimes the conflict was ideological; other times it was petty. Both features were part of the history of black life in urban-industrial America. For instance, well-to-do old settlers, who feared that the migrants narrowed their social, political, and economic options, worked to distance themselves. In response to such ostracism, the new arrivals created their own social clubs, churches, and sense of "home."

Yet an experiential commonality could narrow the social divide. Industrial time, as Grossman details, required speed, efficiency, and regularity. Eager to learn, many migrants made the adjustment; however, occupational options were narrowly drawn. Thus, whether newcomer or old settler, the typical African American was working class and on the margins of the industrial order, either because of the type of job or because of the nature of that job. Consequently, one's position in the world of work connected men and women who differed in other respects.

The duration of those connections cannot be fully understood unless issues at work are analyzed in relation to issues at home. Failure to do so leads us down certain intellectual blind alleys. Grossman writes, for example, "It was the relationship between their different past and their place in the northern industrial city—a heritage and consciousness unfamiliar to white workers—that led most migrants to reject unionization" (p. 244). But what does this mean? His examples notwithstanding, there was little difference between those blacks who migrated to the urban South and those who settled in the urban North. Southern blacks were as responsive to unionization as any other group—more so in some instances. Therefore, did the split between northern-born and southern-born blacks turn on heritage and consciousness as well or on different interpretations of their place in the family of the working class? Why was it that urbanization and industrialization combined to minimize ethnic differences at work for all groups except blacks? If we are to fully understand their role in the nation's regional political economies, we must peer into the creases of black life, which means coming to terms with concepts like home and community. The by-product

will be a fuller understanding of the relationship between power and culture in the industrial phase of American history.

Concerned with black migration, the industrial order, and the search for empowerment, these two books add considerably to a renaissance in Afro-American urban history. Although the authors emphasize different points, they both place migration and urbanization in the development of an industrial order. Moreover, these books underscore the need for an overarching interpretive framework, and in that respect both point to promising new departures in Afro-American urban history.

– *Earl Lewis*
University of Michigan,
Ann Arbor

NOTES

1. Elliott Rudwick, "Black Urban History in the Doldrums," *Journal of Urban History* 9 (1983), 251-260.

2. Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (Urbana, 1985), appendix.

3. For a fuller discussion of this point see Earl Lewis, "Acting in Their Own Interests: African Americans and the Great Migration," *Crisis* 98 (1990), 22.

4. Most notably included in this group are Elsa Barkley Brown, "Uncle Ned's Children: Richmond, Virginia's Black Community, 1890-1930" (Ph.D. dissertation, Kent State University, 1990); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, 1990); Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Coal, Color and Class: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932* (Urbana, 1990).