Lizbeth Cohen’s
Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939
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Making a New Deal:
Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939

(New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

CONOR CASEY

In Making a New Deal, Lizbeth Cohen examines how Chicago’s industrial workers, who were divided by ethnicity, geography, and race in the strike wave of 1919, became the paragons of solidarity who helped unionize the same industries during the 1930s and how these workers turned from localized, “machine” politics towards the national politics of the Democratic Party with a commitment to a federal welfare state (5). According to Cohen, the answer lies in the explosion of mass culture in the 1920s, which sped acculturation of immigrants into “mainstream” American society while simultaneously reinforcing a shared sense of ethnic identity. Cohen argues that it was by partaking in this new popular culture that these groups were able to transcend the divisions that had divided them when the bleak economic realities of the Great Depression triggered a new wave of labor activism in the 1930s.

Cohen argues that in the 1920s, ethnic consumers began to partake in mass culture by first experiencing that culture via the window of ethnic fraternal organizations, radio, and films. The process was sometimes paradoxical: fraternal organizations often competed with “mainstream” commercial insurance programs, but their consolidation along national rather than regional bonds fostered broader ethnic identities. For example, people who had once thought of themselves as Romans or Tuscans began to create a broader “Italian” identity. Likewise, movies, which in neighborhood theaters had reinforced community bonds by providing a venue for neighborhood interaction even as they exposed immigrants to mass culture, had a changing significance as chain movie houses and “talkies” squeezed out neighborhood movie houses. In the new movie houses, cheering and heckling during the movies were discouraged and neighborhood contests and performances were no longer welcome. Similarly, employer bids for employee loyalty had unanticipated side-effects. Ironically, employees came to expect the benefits of welfare capitalism and the ideals of the new management ethos while remaining ambivalent toward companies when
work remained unsteady and conditions of employment oppressive.

Cohen contends that with the failure of ethnic institutions during the Great Depression on one hand and the unfulfilled ideals of employer welfare schemes on the other, workers were ready for the industrial unionism of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). When ethnic institutions failed under the staggering economic catastrophe of the Great Depression, immigrants felt their communities had failed them. Workers felt betrayed by their own communities, when fraternal aid organizations floundered and ethnic banks went bust. Similarly, as soon as employer welfare schemes proved inadequate, workers turned to the federal government for aid. Moreover, the failure of ethnic community leaders and the local party “machines” pushed workers to turn towards the nascent New Deal labor/ethnic/liberal coalition of the Democratic Party, which appeared committed to federal intervention and a capitalist welfare state.

Cohen’s argument transports the reader from immigrant neighborhoods to the shop floor, from the 1920s to the late 1930s, and across ethnic and racial divides. The sources Cohen employs range wide as well; government reports, periodicals, secondary sources, maps, correspondence, and oral history interviews are all skillfully incorporated to lend authority to her arguments. The author structures her book chronologically and topically, treating different aspects of changing immigrant culture and how they changed over time. Her model of culture is dynamic and shifting, and she succeeds in recapturing the achievements of the workers who made the CIO union movement “without romanticizing who they were or denying the imperfections in what they achieved” (368). In her subtle analysis, Cohen highlights the often-paradoxical effects of mass media and cultural institutions on workers, which both facilitated their transition to the “mainstream” and helped maintain their ethnic bonds. Instead of posit- ing a simple polar model of “ethnic” to “mainstream,” Cohen sees the process of acculturation as contested, contingent, and fluid rather than as a linear process. In addition, the author never loses site of the particularity of different experiences of distinct ethnic communities in her larger picture of acculturation. Such an intricate and thoughtful model makes her arguments much more compelling and leaves room for future scholarship to complicate her picture without sub-suming her skillful model of social change.
Tomás Almaguer’s

*Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California*

(Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994)

DREW OETZEL

In *Racial Fault Lines*, Tomás Almaguer sets out to examine the establishment of white supremacist society in late nineteenth-century California. He provides several reasons for focusing on California in his study, primarily arguing that California represented a unique example of race and group interaction. Almaguer cites many studies of nineteenth-century race relations that tended to focus on the black/white binary prevalent in the eastern United States. Any study of race in California, however, needs to take into account multiple racial groups extending well beyond the traditional binary. Indeed, for Almaguer, California provides “unique opportunities to study both the evolution of racializing discourses and the hierarchical structuring of racial inequalities in a context where more than two racialized populations contest for group position within the social structure” (2).

Almaguer’s primary focus is the American period of California’s nineteenth century, beginning roughly in 1850. Though he never states it explicitly, Almaguer’s choice of periodization seems intuitive, for it was during this time frame that the racialized white supremacist society of California solidified as both native-born and immigrant white Europeans allied themselves against the rest of non-white California. At times, Almaguer dips back before the American conquest, particularly when he describes the roots of Native-American and Mexican populations in the state. However, his main focus remains on the period from the Gold Rush to the turn of the century.

The book is framed as an expansion of Almaguer’s original Marxist examination of race and capitalist development in California. By using recent social theories on gender and sexuality, he has reframed his analysis as a comparison “of racialization in which capitalism is viewed as part of the institutional apparatus structuring white supremacy in the state” (x). Almaguer uses this more recent interpretation to bring to the fore the multivalent forces which combined to create the racial, social, and class distinctions of California during this time. By
showing how all groups—even those who were oppressed—interacted and vied for place and status, Almaguer attempts to dispel the “master narrative” of top-down impetus in the rise of white supremacy in California.

In essence, *Racial Fault Lines* is a synthesis of much of the extant research on various ethnic and racial groups in California during this time frame. The vast majority of Almaguer’s sources are secondary, and in setting both the theoretical and synthetic frameworks, Almaguer quotes heavily from other works—sometimes devoting half a page or more to another historian’s words. With the exception of two chapters based on primary sources, Almaguer’s objective seems to have been to reframe the pre-existent scholarship within a newer theoretical framework. Additionally, he attempts to make a comparison between experiences—sometimes convergent, sometimes quite different—of the main racial and ethnic groups in the state.

The third chapter, the first of two research chapters, is an examination of the changing status of Mexican Americans in Ventura County from statehood through the turn of the century. Almaguer maps the decline of the *California* ranching class, whose lands had been mostly appropriated by Anglo-American speculators during the first two decades of statehood. After discussing the Anglo takeover, he follows the growth of agribusiness in the county, as fruits and sugar beet production began to replace the cattle and sheep of the first half of the century. Almaguer situates the increasing marginalization of Mexican Americans in this greater context of change, as Ventura County transformed from a pastoral Mexican-dominated economy to one lead by capitalist agribusinesses. Mexican Americans, along with Chinese and later Japanese immigrants, were thus forced onto the bottom rungs of unskilled, primarily farm labor.

Chapter seven, which was reprinted from an article in the journal *Labor History*, also addresses Ventura County and contains Almaguer’s most interesting research. He details the 1903 Oxnard Sugar Beet strike, in which a newly formed coalition of Japanese and Mexican-American farm laborers known as the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (JMLA), fought against a white takeover of the contract companies that hired and organized farm labor in the county. Previously, many of these companies had been Japanese owned, however, white farmers sought to take control by forcing all such companies to subcontract through one agency that would, in turn, control the wages and benefits of the workers. This strike was unique for several reasons: it was successful, and the JMLA was one of the first expressly multi-ethnic unions in California. Moreover, the strike’s success forced white organized labor to recognize the JMLA. However, in an all too-typical instance of labor union racism, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) only granted a charter to the Mexican portion of the union, specifically forbidding any Asian involvement.

Chapter seven is the most powerful and arguably the most important section of Almaguer’s work. It details a heretofore under-examined labor victory and it also provides an excellent example of several of Almaguer’s central points. The AFL’s ultimate rejection of the Japanese portion of the JMLA established that white supremacy crossed class lines while underscoring the dissimilar levels of assimilation and oppression different racial and ethnic groups experienced. Though marginalized and oppressed, the story of Mexican Americans in California differed greatly from that of other groups—they were able, through legal and cultural channels, to obtain a more middling position compared to other groups.

Unfortunately, only this is the only chapter that stands out in a work that is for the most part a synthesis and retread of existing studies. The goal of synthetic history is not usually to introduce new evidence, and
here Almaguer does not disappoint. Most of the events detailed were well known. Almaguer does achieve some success by placing the experiences of blacks, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Chinese, and Japanese side by side in order to demonstrate how images of one group affected the other, how their levels of oppression and assimilation differed, and especially how California could not be understood using the more traditional stance of black versus white.

The biggest disappointment, however, is the theoretical reframing of the evidence. Almaguer states that new ideas regarding gender and sexuality give new insights into the experience of race in California. However, apart from co-opting the use of certain “buzzwords” in section headings, Almaguer provides little analysis based on these concepts. A prime example comes from the chapter on Native Americans. Almaguer titles this section “The White Masculinist Assault on the California Indians” wherein he details the horrific pogroms that occurred on the Northern California frontier. The section title implies a discussion of how frontier white males constructed a masculine identity via the murder of Native Americans. Disappointingly, beyond the title, gender does not enter the examination of these events and Almaguer misses an opportunity to provide what could have been a fascinating reexamination of the evidence.

Overall, Almaguer’s work does not succeed in reframing these events in light of new sociological understandings and, though important, the previously published research on the Oxnard Sugar Beet Strike of 1903 and the comparative synthesis cannot save the entirety of this book. Allowing for the broad scope of his work—particularly regarding the number of groups involved—if Almaguer had been less ambitious and had focused instead on the comparative aspects he would have been more successful. Leaving out his attempts at a theoretical reframing could have possibly allowed him to tease out more information on how the various racial, ethnic, and class groups vied for status and position within the complex and unique example that California provided.