

REVIEW ARTICLE

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Comparing urban crises: race, migration, and the transformation of the modern American city

Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (2001) (Cornell University Press, Ithaca) viii, 295 pp.

Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (2002) (University of Chicago Press, Chicago) xi, 333 pp.

Carmen Teresa Whalen, *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia: Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economies* (2001) (Temple University Press, Philadelphia) xiii, 309 pp.

The urban crisis that has afflicted many American cities since at least the 1960s has attracted no end of scholarly attention. Sociologists have developed their (often) static models and frameworks, anthropologists have engaged in extensive ethnographic study, political scientists have analysed deepening conflict in neighbourhoods and at polling places, and economists have charted job loss and redevelopment schemes. Urban crises have also of late captured the attention of numerous historians, whose models are often fuzzier than those of their social science counterparts (not a bad thing!). At the same time, their assumptions are just as clear and their sense of nuance and complexity usually greater.

Understanding contemporary racial, economic and political conflict in US cities requires taking a longer and in-depth view of how social groups conceived their interests and acted on them. Three new, distinctive books – focusing on Detroit, Brownsville (in Brooklyn, New York) and Philadelphia – join the growing historical literature on the roots, contours and legacies of urban crisis. While they do not necessarily force us to reassess the ‘fate of postwar urban America’, as one author claims (Thompson, 218) they do offer considerable, and valuable, detail and insight into the ways in which migration and immigration, economic imperatives and/or choices, labour strife, and ethnic and racial conflicts shaped the history of these specific urban communities.

Let us begin with Detroit, once a thriving industrial juggernaut which was home to a huge, vibrant working-class community, that had fallen on harder times by the 1960s. From the 1940s onward, substantial black migration and growing activist challenges to discrimination and racial inequality were met by deepening white hostility and resistance, spilling over into

protracted conflicts at workplaces, in neighbourhoods and at voting booths. The out-migration of both industrial jobs and white residents contributed to making black poverty a permanent feature of the evolving urban landscape and the city the poster child for the seemingly intractable problems of urban blight and racial conflict.

By 1970, Heather Ann Thompson argues in her *Whose Detroit?*, Detroiters, thoroughly fractured along racial and political lines, advanced a variety of conflicting interpretations of their city's woes – which were many – and visions for transforming their urban centre. Some, including many white conservatives nostalgic for the 'halcyon days' of earlier decades when white authority was firmly in place, promoted a law-and-order agenda; white and black liberals maintained a stubborn faith in the transformative power of Great Society programmes to bring about both racial integration and economic opportunity; still others, particularly black radicals inspired by Marxism – Leninism, articulated a 'far more revolutionary dream' (3). Thompson explores these antagonistic visions in considerable detail and attempts to re-create the urgency contemporaries felt about the city's future. Her underlying assumption is that 'well into the early 1970s it was far from clear' (3) which vision would prevail – would Detroit remain segregated and dominated by conservative whites, become a liberal 'oasis of opportunity for the black middle class', or transform itself into an 'island of black nationalist and white leftist revolution' (3).

A narrative thread woven through the book is the story of James Johnson, Jr, a black man born in rural poverty in 1934 in Mississippi who was a participant in the vast 'Second Great Migration' that brought some 5.5 million African Americans to the North after 1940. Following a military discharge in the late 1950s for emotional problems, Johnson worked at a range of low-paid jobs in Detroit, including stints as a janitor, a cook and eventually a factory worker. No leftist or nationalist, Johnson – like many black autoworkers – suffered harsh shop floor working conditions as well as racist treatment from white foremen. In July 1970 he snapped, shooting to death two white foremen and a white worker. In a surprising judicial victory in a closely watched trial, Johnson was declared not guilty by reason of insanity. Later, while in a mental institution, Johnson learned that his claim against the Chrysler Corporation had been affirmatively ruled upon by the Michigan Workman's Compensation Bureau. The meanings that radicals and conservatives ascribed to Johnson's violent outburst and the legal battle that followed are pursued by Thompson at considerable length. To many whites, she argues, Johnson's violence 'seemed simply to substantiate a long-held suspicion that urban blacks were determined to destroy the city and its workplaces' (2); to the city's revolutionaries, it was 'politically symbolic and worthy of Che Guevara or Mao Tse-tung' (2).

Central to Thompson's argument is her repeatedly stated belief that control of Detroit – its politics and its factory shop floors – was genuinely up for grabs. At the level of mayoral politics, it clearly was. Thompson effectively charts the efforts of liberal white mayor Jerome Cavanagh to pursue civil rights and urban liberalism in the mid-1960s, the response of conservative law-and-order white voters and politicians, and the political consolidation of black mayor Coleman Young in the 1970s. Liberal and conservative coalitions attacked each other over countless issues but ultimately, Thompson shows, urban liberalism – this time with a black face – prevailed in the 1970s.

For Thompson, the control of Detroit involved far more than electoral politics and formal political coalitions. Through her tone and words, she conveys her sympathy for left-wing

challengers to the racial and economic status quo. Those challengers were numerous and vocal. Detroit claimed a significant presence of black and white radicals – revolutionaries of various stripes ranging from black cultural nationalists to black and white Marxist – Leninists to white Trotskyites – intent on remaking the social and economic order. High black unemployment, racist employment practices and pervasive police brutality fuelled a growing sympathy for nationalist and radical groups in the broader black community. Thompson demonstrates that support for the radicals' challenges to racial inequality and brutality, if not for the specific ideologies of the multiple revolutionary groups, was widespread.

Did black and white revolutionaries really contest liberals and conservatives for *control* of the city? What Thompson ultimately shows is not so much a contest for real control as the proliferation of political agendas and the existence of widespread radical and conservative protest. Thompson effectively demonstrates various radicals' roles in publicizing discriminatory treatment, in challenging discriminatory jury selection rules, and in giving voice to the anger and growing intolerance of the racial status quo in the black community. While she is undoubtedly correct in asserting that grassroots discontent found 'expression in increasingly popular' radical movements 'which sought a complete political overhaul of the city' (72), she overstates her case in claiming that 'civic radicals and conservatives alike began mobilizing to take power in Detroit, and a full-scale war for urban control began', with the 'future of this city . . . completely up for grabs' (72). Political polarization in the post-1967 period may have provided fuel for left-wing activists, but it did not generate 'new leadership possibilities' (81) filled by revolutionary black nationalists and white radicals.

Thompson's scholarly sympathy for the revolutionaries feels a bit out of place in our contemporary sober, cynical political times, and it occasionally detracts from her narrative. With one key exception, she treats the hard left with the analytical equivalent of kid gloves. One of their newspapers, the *Inner City Voice*, 'was truly a community-oriented paper, albeit a most radical one' that 'offered examples of how other revolutionary freedom fighters around the world had handled their similarly oppressive conditions' (83), she observes with no further comment. Presumably, however, the oppressive conditions faced outside the United States were 'objectively' different from the ones faced by those inside the United States (theories of internal colonialism or the fetishization of Third World revolutionaries notwithstanding), yet Thompson lets the radicals' self-presentation stand. On another occasion she notes that while those revolutionary activists employed a language that was 'not pretty', they were 'determined to "tell it like it is"' (84). Yet the radicals' denunciation of 'black middle-class "Toms", "honkie students"' and "'racist fat ass'" (84) was not 'telling it like it is', to invoke that cliché; rather, it constituted a distinctive political stance. Finally, Thompson describes a trip by General Baker (a founder of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement) to meet 'freedom fighters in Cuba, including Castro himself, as 'exhilarating and inspiring'; Baker was 'determined to bring black liberation politics to Detroit' (109) as result of that visit, she concludes. Baker undoubtedly saw it that way, but Thompson's choice of words suggests that Thompson does too. Cuba may have captured the imagination of late 1960s radicals, but in retrospect it is evident that American radicals' romance with the Third World left blinded them to the authoritarianism and violence of their supposed heroes.

To be sure, Thompson is not uncritical of the revolutionary left. In a revealing section she briefly notes that its demise in the early 1970s was in part brought on by factors internal to these movements. The racial exclusivity of black nationalists created problems not only with

whites but with some African Americans. The 'rhetoric, style, and racially exclusive and ill-planned tactics' (168), Thompson concludes, 'severely weakened' the Revolutionary Union Movements (RUMs). African Americans, particularly older ones, were put off by RUM leaders' denunciations of black union officials as "'Sambos'" and "'Mother Fuckers'" (168), while RUM activists' calling white women 'Honkey Whores' and treating black women as subservient to black men did not help much on the gender front either. Indiscriminate threats of violence – 'those who oppose us will be dealt with through any means necessary' (169), they said – did 'not bode well for the RUMs' longevity' (169). Indeed. The revolutionaries' behaviour caused 'a serious public relations problem' (173). Yet Thompson's analysis and criticism fall short of engaging with the actual beliefs and programmes of revolutionaries, black and white. Subjecting language and behaviour to criticism, Thompson passes up an opportunity to examine the concrete agendas of communists, cultural nationalists and other radicals – beyond their challenges to racism – which, presumably, contributed to their marginalization as well.

Thompson is not so circumspect in her attitude toward her final target, the United Automobile Workers of America. That huge and once-powerful industrial union, in Thompson's eyes, missed an opportunity to transform itself through an understanding of the genuine grievances of black and white workers erupting on the shop floors. Had it done so, it might have avoided its long-term fate. Publicly committed to racial liberalism and the Great Society programmes of the administration of President Lyndon Johnson, the UAW also brought home the proverbial bacon (higher wages, good benefits). But the UAW dropped the ball on the burning issues of plant safety and the relentless pace of the production line. Those issues, along with racist supervision, fuelled a powerful rank-and-file discontent, which manifested itself over the course of the 1960s in massive numbers of grievances filed, wildcat strikes and growing shop floor violence. The radical dissident groups that emerged to channel that discontent met with the implacable hostility of the UAW, which did everything in its power to quash it 'by whatever means necessary' (190), Thompson recounts disapprovingly and with some exaggeration. That the UAW would find anti-white nationalists and self-described communists a threat is hardly surprising.

Did the US labour movement always have 'more power over its destiny than its leaders imagined' (8), as Thompson argues it did? Perhaps. Given the politicization of much US labour history, the answer to the question invariably reflects the politics of the person answering it. To my mind, it takes a leap of political faith to believe that a UAW – or any other large union – could have avoided its ultimate decline at the hands of corporate counter-attacks and globalization if only it had heeded its rank-and-file militants, embraced more direct action on the shop floor, and pursued a more class-conscious and adversarial bargaining strategy toward management. Thompson's book cannot definitively answer the counterfactual proposition – what book could? – but she does make a solid case for the UAW's own contributions, through its insensitivity to black workers and shop floor concerns, to its multiple problems during and after the late 1960s.

While Detroit's reputation for urban blight and conflict in the 1960s and 1970s stood in sharp contrast to its earlier, Second World War-era reputation as a vibrant 'arsenal of democracy', Brownsville, New York – located in east Brooklyn – never had much of a reputation to lose. Like Detroit, Brownsville long supported an abundance of community associations which defended neighbourhood residents and worked to bring greater resources into the area.

Throughout its history, Brownsville had attracted to its tenements poorer immigrants and their children. Once a waste disposal site in the late nineteenth century, it became by the start of the twentieth century a working-class immigrant community, home to a large and growing Jewish population which worked in garment trade sweatshops and construction. For some, this immigrant Mecca was a 'cauldron of intellectual ferment', a 'vibrant' working-class community (9). For others, it was 'one huge cesspool of illiteracy and hoodlumism' (9), a place, Alfred Kazin once remarked, 'that measured all success by our skill in getting away from it' (10). Both portraits were true, Wendell Pritchett suggests in his study, *Brownsville, Brooklyn*.

Brownsville's physical environment always left much to be desired. Marked by garment sweatshops and tenements, Brownsville was home to a large working-class population and had more than its share of poverty, juvenile delinquency and crime. Public housing in the 1940s initially promised some hope for residents, who enthusiastically welcomed it, but that hope was quickly dashed by overcrowding, inadequate resources and escalating social problems. With the city of New York unwilling to invest many financial resources in the community's infrastructure, Brownsville decayed further in the 1950s and 1960s. Growing numbers of poor African Americans and Puerto Ricans displaced by massive urban renewal projects elsewhere in the city moved in, while whites – mostly Jews – steadily moved out in the post-Second World War era. The deterioration of Brownsville was abetted by urban renewal planners, who viewed the community as a kind of dumping ground capable of absorbing the 'urban renewal refugees' (121). 'Desperation is the mood of most residents in the Brownsville – East New York section' (142) of the city, the *New York Times* concluded in 1955. By mid-century, Pritchett writes, the community 'suffered from . . . decrepit housing, deteriorating schools, persistent juvenile delinquency, and troubling indices of disease' (79). Only in the 1960s – with a temporary influx of federal dollars during the 'War on Poverty' and with the rise of black power ideology – did that mood change, at least temporarily. But by 1970, one resident could still report that Brownsville remained 'the most deprived community in the whole city – deprived in every shape and form imaginable' (240). Shortly afterwards, a politician described it as 'the first tangible sign of the collapse of our civilization' (242). Visitors compared Brownsville 'to Dresden, Germany, after World War II' (243), Pritchett notes. It was 'an urban wasteland' (250).

For all its poverty and crime, Brownsville was also home to generations of community activists determined to make their neighbourhood a more hospitable, and equitable, place to live. In the early twentieth century it provided fertile soil for dozens of apolitical synagogues and socialist organizations. Leftists of various affiliations were active in creating a vibrant local political culture; the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations brought with it a significant leftist presence in the 1930s and 1940s. Their activities are sketched only lightly by Pritchett, whose real focus is on Brownsville's 'diverse and vibrant advocacy community' (79) in the years after 1940, in particular on the progressive Brownsville Neighborhood Council (BNC), the Brownsville Boys' Club (BBC), and a variety of more radical organizations in the 1960s.

From the late 1930s through the 1950s, Brownsville followed a quite different path from that of many other urban centres undergoing racial and economic change. Elsewhere, as recent scholarship has shown, white homeowners' associations vociferously protested against the 'penetration' of minorities into their neighbourhoods; white voters increasingly voiced support for conservative, often racist, law-and-order politicians; and white ethnics often rioted against minorities. Not so in Brownsville. Progressive white (mostly Jewish) community

activists – their political affiliations and ideologies are not systematically explored by Pritchett – adopted a softer, more enlightened approach that involved petitioning the city of New York for decent public housing (to ‘stabilize the community’ [63]), more public recreation and educational facilities, and anti-discrimination legislation; not only did they not engage in anti-black rhetoric, they actually welcomed black newcomers to their community. ‘In comparison to other New York neighborhoods, and those in other cities’, Pritchett convincingly concludes, ‘Brownsville was a beacon of racial harmony’ (82). But when many residents later recalled the 1940s and even 1950s as a time when race relations were good, Pritchett questions their memories. Racial inequality was starkly evident, and blacks and whites, their memories notwithstanding, led largely separate lives.

Furthermore, white liberal groups simply did not do enough, Pritchett also concludes. Spearheading an enlightened urban, racial liberalism was the Brownsville Neighborhood Council, which formed in 1938. Despite its sincere efforts, ultimately it could not counteract the community’s economic powerlessness and the city’s larger indifference to its plight to reverse Brownsville’s further decline. And while its racial policies set it apart from those of white community groups elsewhere in the United States, Pritchett finds its efforts inadequate to the tasks at hand. The BNC, he argues, ‘neglected to address more practical concerns of local blacks, including police brutality and discrimination’ (93). Working-class blacks, at least according to one BNC staffer, felt uncomfortable participating ‘because of educational and other social handicaps’, leading them to ‘withdraw’ from the group’s activities (94). Pritchett is critical that only a small number of black Brownsville leaders were involved in BNC policy-making. ‘The BNC was liberal in ideology’, he argues, but the ‘organization’s structure was not particularly amenable to the incorporation of new residents. . . . Brownsville whites often looked at racial concerns as a regional or national problem rather than a local issue, and this may have contributed to the failure of these neighborhood organizations to attract black residents’ (137).

Pritchett’s critical evaluation of white liberals at mid-century seems more like an anachronistic political judgement or retrospective wishful thinking than it does a realistic assessment of options. More importantly, his own evidence undercuts his case. The BNC dealt with ‘relatively distant cases and activists could feel good about their support without making substantial personal sacrifices’ (138), he writes at one point. But did they? To be sure, those white activists strongly protested against Jim Crow in the South and advocated state-wide anti-discrimination legislation. But, at the same time, they advocated racial integration in their local schools, fought for ‘nursery facilities in the black areas of Brownsville’ (94), called for the appointment of a black appointee to the Board of Education, and lobbied for greater financial resources from the city to combat juvenile delinquency and crime. Presumably these were not ‘abstract, global issues’ (107) that slighted the ‘racial aspects of neighborhood issues’ (83); presumably, these were ‘specific concerns’ of local black residents that the BNC did address. It is not clear why Pritchett would assume that these issues were not relevant to Brownsville’s working-class black migrants. Since the voices of these migrants do not appear in these pages, however, it is hard to know what they found important or what they did not.

Pritchett offers a more plausible explanation, even if he attributes less significance to it than to the shortcomings of white liberals. ‘Black and Latino organizations did not grow commensurately with the new population’, he observes (132). In the 1940s and 1950s, the Brooklyn chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

(NAACP) took little interest in Brownsville because, Pritchett suggests, its middle-class leaders were little interested in working-class issues and, besides, Brownsville's lingering reputation for left-wing politics did not go down well with the anti-communist NAACP during the Cold War. Brownsville's black leaders (Pritchett says little about Puerto Ricans in Brownsville) tended to be ministers more interested in their congregational efforts than in politics; they were by no means militants or interested 'in grassroots organizing or protest' (87). Relatively new to the area, largely poor, ignored by established civil rights groups and served poorly by their own ministerial leaders, minority migrants to Brownsville, at least initially, proved unable to generate their own internal community infrastructure for political organizing, representation or protest. Although Pritchett acknowledges these developments, he oddly saves his fire for white liberals in the BNC. Could an even more enlightened, perhaps politically correct BNC have succeeded in mobilizing working-class black newcomers in a successful political coalition? It seems unlikely.

Although most whites 'had left the neighborhood' by the early 1960s, Prichard demonstrates, 'activism did not end' (191). The 1960s witnessed not just the complete demographic transformation of Brownsville into a virtually all black and Latino community, but its political revival as well. His final chapters offer case studies of a strike by hospital workers' Local 1199 against Brownsville's Beth-El Hospital, the rise and fall of the Great Society's War on Poverty programmes, the bitter Ocean Hill – Brownsville teachers' strike in 1968, and the community's travails since 1970. Replacing the defunct BNC, a new Brownsville Community Council (BCC) became a central player in anti-poverty efforts in the 1960s; with large sums of money flowing into Brownsville, grassroots community groups temporarily flourished, activists were put on the public payroll and sought to 'empower poor residents' (210) and 'poor youngsters' (215). But what the government gives, the government can take away. Funding cutbacks dried up many of the new organizations and their initiatives, and 'empowerment', if it ever actually existed, evaporated. Pritchett acknowledges that the War on Poverty's community action programmes did not 'bring about a radical alteration of the power structure', but concludes that they did 'result in concrete advancements for many residents' (218). He draws back, however, from analysing and assessing the actual political beliefs of radical activists during the 1960s, as well as those of local proponents of 'community control' of education that resulted in the divisive school strike of 1968.

Carmen Teresa Whalen adopts a rather different approach from those of Thompson and Pritchett in her *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia*. Her focus is neither an immigrant community nor the history of activism and resistance to oppression and discrimination. Rather, she carefully reconstructs the dynamics of labour migration, the gendered character of migration and workforce participation, personal and familial strategies employed by migrants in search of opportunity in the United States, and the often hostile reception these migrants received. The result is a fascinating study that combines attention to macroscopic economic and political forces, on the one hand, with attention to the voices of the migrants themselves, on the other.

Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia must be understood primarily as labour migrants, Whalen argues. The dramatic transformation of the Puerto Rican economy in the decades after 1940 set in motion hundreds of thousands of people, sending some 27,000 to Philadelphia alone by 1970. The decline of rural agriculture and agricultural processing generated unemployment levels that could not be absorbed by the island government's Operation Bootstrap, a labour-intensive export-oriented programme of industrialization. To deal with rising unemployment,

the government promoted contract labour programmes that would dispatch Puerto Rican workers directly to the United States. Taking advantage of those programmes, or simply migrating on their own, Puerto Rican men and women increasingly entered the US labour market.

That entrance was ultimately facilitated by Puerto Rican migrants' legal status as citizens of the United States. During the Second World War, US officials and agricultural growers preferred foreign workers – from Mexico or the British West Indies – because that labour supply could be expanded or contracted as needed, with migrants sent back to their country of origin upon the expiration of their contracts. Because of their citizenship, Puerto Ricans could not be expelled and migrants might become a permanent, unwelcome presence. But Puerto Ricans eventually became a 'preferred source of labor' (66); US agricultural growers, particularly in the mid-Atlantic states, sought their labour, the Puerto Rican government promoted their migration, and workers themselves accepted contract labour as a straightforward 'economic strategy' (70) to achieve opportunity.

That opportunity was a circumscribed one. Migrants encountered a 'plethora of jobs in a limited range of occupations' (138), Whalen observes, for the Philadelphia region's labour market was 'segmented along racial and gender lines' (138). Men found seasonal employment in farming in the mid-Atlantic states (particularly New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania); but while it seemed as if on 'every corner there was a factory' (137) in Philadelphia, Puerto Rican men discovered that high-paying manufacturing work was difficult to obtain. Instead, they were disproportionately concentrated in the low-wage service sector, especially in hotel and restaurant jobs, and to a degree in construction. In contrast, Puerto Rican women quickly secured employment in garment, food processing and other low-wage manufacturing establishments. While some were unionized firms, providing higher wages and benefits, most were not. Drawing on their own ingenuity and informal networks of family members and friends, these women entered Philadelphia's manufacturing work in significant numbers. There were 'a lot of garment factories in Philadelphia', one woman claimed. 'You would get a factory job anywhere in Philadelphia' (148). That state of affairs ended in the late 1960s, as the city's economic foundations began to erode when factories started closing down and leaving the city for cheaper labour elsewhere. During the period of high employment, Puerto Rican migrants remained collectively poor; with rising unemployment, the situation became worse.

In both periods, Puerto Ricans came to be seen by white Philadelphians as a 'problem'. Violence between migrants and local whites broke out sporadically as the city underwent profound demographic changes (as in Detroit and Brownsville, tens of thousands of whites moved out as significant numbers of African Americans moved in). Despite their citizenship, whites perceived Puerto Ricans as foreigners, not Americans. (In the 1950s, one survey showed that less than half of those polled knew that Puerto Ricans were US citizens.) Politicians and social workers discounted white racial or ethnic prejudice and instead focused on the supposed role Puerto Ricans' culture played in their impoverishment. Migrants were 'blamed for deteriorating conditions' in low-income neighbourhoods (190), and studies 'reaffirmed [white] neighbors' stereotypes of Puerto Ricans by focusing on "the behavior of Puerto Ricans", their "social habits", their "language deficiency" and their "clannish" social interactions' (195). Academic theories of the 'culture of poverty' only reinforced the sense that migrants' behaviour, family structure and values were responsible for their plight. By the late 1950s, academics and social service officials alike condemned 'the Latin mentality and the Latin tradition' and viewed the Puerto Rican family and community as 'defective' (203). In an era of

widespread plant closures and deepening poverty, Puerto Ricans further came to be seen as 'the other underclass', an even less flattering portrait than that of the 'culture of poverty'. However much the 'economic and living conditions in the inner cities have changed' over time, she concludes, 'racial ideologies have been marked by continuities' (241).

Whalen weaves into her solid accounts of the structural determinants of migration, labour markets and economic status the voices of Puerto Rican migrants, particularly women, who humanize her discussion of the migration process and demonstrate the agency, not passivity, of those resettling in the United States. What Whalen leaves out is precisely what Thompson and Pritchett heavily emphasize: contests for power and grassroots activism. Her response might be: there *were* no overt contests for power, at least not during the early years of migration. Philadelphia's relatively small Puerto Rican community apparently generated few organized political or community groups before the early 1960s. That changed, but the groups which emerged, like Concilio de Organizaciones Hispanas (the Council of Hispanic Organizations), adopted a largely social service orientation. The 'economic restructuring that followed on the heels of Puerto Rican settlement limited the ability of these organizations to improve conditions for Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia' (218), Whalen soberly concludes. To her credit, she does not strain her evidence by investing broader political significance in the efforts of individuals and families to create new lives and re-create community in a new place; those stories stand, and stand well, on their own. At the same time, like Thompson and Pritchett, Whalen misses an opportunity to interrogate the contours, implications and fate of 1960s radicalism – in this instance, that of the Young Lords and other Puerto Rican nationalist groups – in her too brief discussion of activism in that era.

Detroit, Brownsville and Philadelphia all followed different routes to their respective urban crises. To the extent that there is a common theme to be extracted from these three very different books, it is a familiar one: what Thompson calls the 'demographic metamorphosis' (218), or ethnic recomposition of communities – and communities are continually being remade demographically by the movements of diverse groups of people in and out of them – is predictably accompanied by racial and ethnic conflict, particularly in periods of economic insecurity. If conflict was ubiquitous, however, the forms it assumed were hardly the same everywhere. Whites responded to the arrival of growing numbers of blacks and Puerto Ricans in Brownsville in markedly different ways than did whites who responded to non-whites migrating to Detroit and Philadelphia. And in each community, while non-white newcomers and their children challenged white stereotypes and white control, these challenges, too, hardly assumed identical forms. Ultimately, though, each community's fate involved not just ethnic recomposition and political conflict but growing impoverishment brought on by concrete business decisions and broader economic imperatives. Read together, these three studies suggest the benefits of a comparative urban history that examines the multiple roots, contours and legacies of urban crises; they also suggest the advantages of striking an analytical balance between political and economic narratives of urban devastation and those of the efforts to build viable communities in the face of such overwhelming odds.

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