Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960 by John Bodnar; Roger Simon; Michael P. Weber
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The causes of urban black poverty have remained a challenging topic of scholarly inquiry during the decades since the publication of W. E. B. Du Bois' The Philadelphia Negro—A Social Study (1899). Although white racism has been a constant barrier to black economic advancement in cities, Du Bois' pioneering investigation established a framework for subsequent studies by suggesting the extent to which Afro-American social and cultural patterns—products, in part, of white racism—hindered black upward mobility. The increasingly accepted view that the cultural values of urban black migrants are resilient and viable in the urban environment is an extension of Du Bois' own understanding of the vitality of black rural folkways. Similarly, the more traditional view that black urban migrants brought with them or acquired behavior patterns that hampered economic progress reminds us of Du Bois' initial agreement with Booker T. Washington regarding the need for blacks to adapt to the needs of industrial capitalism. The authors of Lives of Their Own give support for the latter view in their insistence on asking if black cultural values—whether intact or modified by the urban environment—prepared blacks for economic success.

Foremost among the virtues of Lives of Their Own is its ambitious attempt to compare the urban experiences of black migrants with those of European immigrants and thereby to create a comparative framework for evaluating the adaptability of Afro-American cultural forms in an urban setting. Other recent studies—most notably James Borchert's Alley Life in Washington (1980)—have stressed the continuity and strength of Afro-American culture even as blacks endured discriminatory treatment and economic failure, but Bodnar, Simon, and Weber suggest that blacks, when compared with Italians and Poles, maintained values that prevented them from exploiting those opportunities that were available to them. In contrast to Stephen Thernstrom, who found, in The Other Bostonians (1973), that discrimination was the most important reason for the relative lack of black economic progress, they emphasize the failure of blacks to build stable communities and beneficial social networks within their own neighborhoods.

Although Borchert and others have pointed to the maintainence of communal values among poor blacks, the authors of Lives of Their Own repeatedly return to the theme of individualism in their discussion of the black urban experience. While white immigrants were able to assist family members and fellow countrymen obtain jobs and acquire property, young blacks, they assert, "emerged from their formative years with a realization that survival would ultimately depend upon their own personal resourcefulness" (p. 91). They support the view that "blacks were choosing an individual rather than collective approach to survival" (p. 92). Rather than responding to segregation and discrimination by withdrawing to a "unified institutional infrastructure" such as that built by Italians and Poles, blacks "remained mixed within a patchwork of ethnic, racial, and religious, and economic groups" (p. 82). Far from displaying cultural alienation, they indicate that blacks more often sought
advancement through education and entrepreneurship. In contrast to previous studies that respond to the claim that blacks are simply replicating the mobility paths of earlier generations of European immigrants by insisting that blacks faced greater discrimination, the present study suggests that blacks had higher expectations regarding their ability to get ahead on their own than did some immigrant groups and were, therefore, less likely to recognize the need for group cohesion and collective strategies of advancement.

Though the assertions in *Lives of Their Own* about black aspirations and cultural values are suggestive, they are not entirely persuasive. Bodnar, Simon, and Weber portray the values of the black and immigrant communities in broad strokes that sometimes seem like stereotypes rather than reflections of the complex and diverse set of world views that existed within each of these groups. The similarities they found in the mobility rates of northern-born and southern-born blacks, for example, should not have prevented them from recognizing the importance of the gulf between the cultural values of the pre-1900 black residents and those who arrived in the massive migrations of the twentieth century. Like others who have studied blacks and immigrants, they portray pre-migration culture as a homogeneous set of beliefs and as a determinant of specific behavior patterns rather than as a varied resource capable of producing varied responses to the urban environment. They seem to ignore the possibility that differences within these groups might be as significant as the differences that set them apart.

Despite its limitations, however, *Lives of Their Own* is a useful starting point for future research. It advances beyond narrowly-focused studies toward a broader understanding of the ways in which blacks differed from other groups as they developed cultural strategies for survival and economic success in an often hostile and always changing urban setting.

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Majority groups have always been reluctant to relinquish their control over positions of power, prestige and wealth to members of minority groups. Professor James E. Blackwell of the University of Massachusetts addresses this issue in his book *Mainstreaming Outsiders: The Production of Black Professionals.* Blackwell provides us with an excellent study of the progress made in mainstreaming blacks into eight professional fields: medicine, dentistry, optometry, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, engineering, law and social work. In addition, he surveys the advances in the number of blacks earning doctoral degrees. His general conclusion is that progress has been made in most fields, although the progress has been uneven.

Utilizing information collected by the various professional organizations and the federal government, Blackwell treats each field in a separate chapter. He finds, for example, that blacks have always fared better in social work because that was one