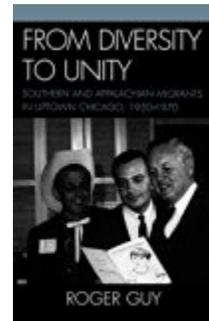


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roger Guy. *From Diversity to Unity: Southern and Appalachian Migrants in Uptown Chicago, 1950-1970*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007. viii + 131 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-1833-7.

Reviewed by Margaret Lee (Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison)
Published on H-Urban (April, 2008)



Southerners as Immigrants?

Reminiscing about Chicago's Uptown neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s, Virginia Bowers reported, "Since there were southern people here and I worked with them everyday, I didn't lose anything. I was still southern. I had started losing my southern accent [at another place of employment], but when I began to work with southerners again I just went back into that role, that southern talk, that old Hillbilly slang, you know" (p. 75). While today Uptown contends with new immigrants and the forces of gentrification, in the postwar period it was best known for its concentration of white southern residents. It is the experience of these southern migrants in Uptown that forms the basis for Roger Guy's *From Diversity to Unity*.

Guy structures his study around the question of how "southerners were forging community in the process of struggling to survive," examining everything from areas of residence to employment to community organizations (p. 5). He argues that it was in the process of moving to the North and adapting to a new environment that these migrants created a uniquely southern identity; yet this identity continued to change in Uptown, creating divergences between Uptown southerners and those who remained in the South. "In short what it meant to be southern in the South became very different than what it meant to be southern in the North" (p. 8). While Guy's work challenges scholars to think of southerners as foreigners in the North, his study would benefit from more analysis of what actually constituted "southern identity."

By addressing issues of community and identity formation, Guy draws strongly from scholarship on immigration and ethnicity. Such works question the nature of ethnicity in the United States, asserting that ethnicity is created in a new American environment in which Old World traditions and culture help immigrants adjust to their new surrounding, create a cohesive group identity lacking in Old World communities, and potentially facilitate assimilation. Immigration historians, thus, argue that ethnic identities like Italian or Irish are developed only in the United States where a common experience pushes diverse migrants from the same country into a larger, cohesive national identity. Guy similarly argues that southerners "bring an identifiable culture with them before arrival that is malleable, which aids in survival and group consciousness," while also contending that "most southerners had no inherent identity in the ethnic sense before coming to Chicago" (pp. 5-6). These statements align Guy with ethnicity scholarship and explicitly compare southern migrants to international immigrants.

As with many immigration studies, Guy starts in chapter 1 with the process of migration and analyzes reasons that both pushed and pulled southerners to Uptown. Although he recognizes the importance of economic factors, especially the mechanization of farming and the collapse of the mining industry in the South, interviewees stressed personal factors in shaping their migration—the presence of relatives in Chicago or a failing marriage were seen as influential alongside lack of employment opportunities. In chapters 2 and 3, Guy stresses the im-

portance of the Uptown neighborhood in creating a coherent southern identity, particularly as the area provided low-cost housing. Once southerners settled in the area, their presence attracted more migrants, concentrating southerners and isolating them from the larger city. Guy argues that as southerners adapted to the city—recognizing dangerous situations, learning to take public transportation, adjusting to diverse neighbors—they took part in a shared migrant experience that fostered a group identity. And, as these individuals encountered new and stressful situations, they came to romanticize their homes in the South, further producing a commonality among migrants. Interestingly, Guy notes that women and men thought about “home” in different terms: men missed the independence and social status they held in the South, while women valued the opportunity to work outside the home in the North, thus leading to different imaginings about their homes in the South.

Additionally, Guy argues that southern white migrants had to adjust to a different racial order in the urban North. Whereas the rules of Jim Crow had strictly patrolled African Americans in the South and limited interracial interactions, Chicago’s more liberal racial order placed southern whites and blacks in close quarters through employment, transportation, and housing. Adjustment to this environment further forged a common southern identity for migrants as they came to terms with a racial order substantially different from their previous experience. This adjustment, however, served to set them apart from friends and family left behind in the South, highlighting the evolving nature of southern identity. Some southerners in Chicago, after embracing racial equality and developing interracial friendships, came into conflict with family members in the South who could not accept such a perspective.

Guy emphasizes, however, that southern migrants were not warmly welcomed in Chicago, further highlighting the similarities between the southern and immigrant experience. In chapter 4, Guy explores how Chicago’s newspapers painted southern migrants as backward, violent, and slovenly individuals who were responsible for the poor and blighted state of the Uptown neighborhood. Southerners were targeted and abused by the local police. Older Uptown residents resented the overcrowding of already poor housing by the influx of southern migrants. Guy argues that such hostility only served to unite southerners in Uptown and spawned the formation of southern institutions to defend the community and create a more respectable image. When newspapers referred to southerners as “hillbillies” and Uptown

as “hillbilly heaven,” for example, southerners adopted these titles and shifted their meaning to terms of pride in their southern heritage.

Finally, in chapters 5 and 6, Guy details how neighborhood institutions supported a unique southern identity in Uptown, especially as these organizations worked to improve local conditions and serve as intermediaries between the southern community and municipal agencies. The Chicago Southern Center, for example, served as a welfare organization for Uptown’s southern residents, helping with employment and housing and acting as a general resource center. The Center was run by southerners, for southerners, and when it began to incorporate social activities, the gatherings emphasized the southern identity of participants: bands played country music and women formed quilting bees. Growing involvement from Jobs or Income Now (an organization supported by Students for a Democratic Society) in Uptown, however, introduced new elements to this southern identity. The group advocated public action to change housing conditions and fight mistreatment from the police. Uptown’s southerners readily joined such fights to secure better conditions for their families, incorporating social activism and protest into what it meant to be southern in this community.

By tracing the experience of southern migrants in Chicago, Guy emphasizes the role of the poor and lower classes in postwar America, a period most often associated with unprecedented economic gain for Americans. He writes, “In an era in America characterized by expanding suburbs and affluence seemingly available to all who desired it, the southern migrant became a reminder of the limits social class placed on achieving the American dream” (p. 4). Additionally, by focusing on southern white migrants, Guy is able to explore how whites—members of the dominant racial group—adjusted to a society with different racial relationships, suggesting areas of future exploration into the ways in which people understand race and its functioning in society.

The most meaningful part of Guy’s work is his reliance on oral history interviews to explore the diverse experiences of individual southern migrants and let them each tell their story. It is through these interviews that Guy most effectively argues for the importance of considering individual circumstances and experiences, not just impersonal forces, like economics and politics, in the history of a community. Indeed, although Guy details the changes in southern agriculture and mining as driving migration to Chicago, he emphasizes that each migrant

had other personal reasons that ultimately resulted in the movement to Uptown. In addition, while “concentrating solely on the larger push and pull factors tends to inadvertently relegate women to the background of the historical narrative,” letting individuals describe their experience allows for consideration of the role of women in the decision to migrate (p. 7).

While focusing on Uptown and individual southerners allows Guy to delve into the story of this community, his local focus often distracts him from drawing larger meanings from his study. Were southern experiences in Uptown replicated in other northern urban areas? Should we see all southerners as their own ethnic group within the larger United States? Although Guy does make comparisons between Uptown’s southern migrants of the 1950s and later ethnic populations, he does so only with groups who actually took up residence in Uptown.

Much of Guy’s project rests on the comparison between southern migrants and international immigrants, and their respective development of group identities. Yet, more analysis of “southern identity” is required if the reader is to believe that this regional identity functioned like ethnicity. In exploring ethnicity, historians focus on

cultural activities, religious practices, and political leanings, among others. Guy does address music and quilting as southern cultural activities, but were there common foods and foodways that helped bind southern migrants together? Did they celebrate holidays in a discernibly different manner than long-term Chicagoans? Additionally, Guy makes passing reference to religion not being transported North with migrants, but does not discuss how unique religious beliefs may have set southerners apart from their northern neighbors, or how differences in religious observances distanced southern migrants from their families in the South. Finally, while Guy explores how southerners began to fight for their community on an activist level, he does not address their involvement in local politics or how a southern identity may have guided them in elections.

Despite these limitations, Guy provides a compelling look at the experiences of southern Americans in the postwar urban North, confronting a new environment and crafting a cohesive community identity in the process. Although it is debatable whether southern identity functioned as a regional or ethnic identity, Guy challenges us to analyze southerners in the North as we do immigrants, confronting the same struggles in the process of community formation.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Margaret Lee. Review of Guy, Roger, *From Diversity to Unity: Southern and Appalachian Migrants in Uptown Chicago, 1950-1970*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14354>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.