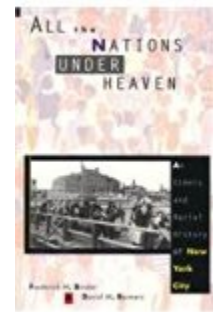


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frederick M. Binder, David M. Reimers. *All the Nations under Heaven: An Ethnic and Racial History of New York City*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. xii + 353 pp. \$28.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-07879-5; \$83.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-07878-8.

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City of Immigrants

Frederick M. Binder and David M. Reimers's *All the Nations under Heaven* is a narrative and analytical history of ethnic and racial New York City. Following the shifting fortunes of New York's ethnic and racial groups from its founding as a Dutch colony in 1624 to the present day, the authors describe how newcomers to the city adjusted and accommodated to the city's ever-changing—and sometimes hostile—environment. The book addresses why they came, what they found, and how they made New York City their own.

According to the authors, New York's multi-ethnic makeup was firmly laid down within years of its founding as the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam. They note, for example, that eighteen languages were reportedly being spoken in the colony in 1643, when it had about a thousand residents. Indeed, by 1664, when the British took the colony over and renamed it New York, it was the most ethnically and racially diverse city in America.

Even though the city's multinational origins established a precedent of pluralism, Binder and Reimers believe that the "real drama" of New York City's ethnic and racial history occurred during the nineteenth century. With massive Irish immigration into the city in the first half of the century—according to the 1855 census the Irish constituted more than fifty percent of the city's foreign-born population—and successive waves of Germans, Italians, East European Jews, and other newcomers, the city's ethnic and racial population increased substantially. Distinct neighborhoods emerged in Man-

hattan: the Irish Sixth Ward, German Kleindeutschland, Little Italy, the Jewish Lower East Side. With numbers came political, economic, and social opportunities as different groups moved into city politics, established themselves in specific trades and industries, or founded their own social and religious institutions.

As one group became established and achieved a measure of success, it tended to move out of its Manhattan neighborhoods and into new enclaves in Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx, or Staten Island. They, in turn, were replaced by new waves of immigrants. In this way, Irish and German immigrants of the mid-nineteenth century were replaced by the so-called new immigrants from Italy and Eastern Europe. Expanded opportunities in employment and education also allowed many European Americans to become "ethnic Americans" rather than "immigrants." Change was oftentimes difficult, however. Many did not wish to cut themselves free from their roots, and even those who did found out that success alone did not enable them to feel totally American.

In the years following World War II, immigrants continued to arrive in New York City, including Puerto Ricans and refugees from Europe. African-American immigration into the city over these decades was particularly significant. In 1940, about six percent of the city's population was African-American. By 1970, it had become twenty percent. Because these newcomers arrived at a time when the city was experiencing economic growth and was enacting laws prohibiting racial, religious, and

ethnic discrimination, it can be said that they arrived in a better time for immigrants than that experienced by previous generations. Despite the relatively good conditions for newcomers, however, poverty and racial and ethnic conflict never disappeared.

Unfortunately, these problems increased in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, creating an environment that was less than welcoming for a new wave of immigrants from the third world. Before 1970, most newcomers to New York City originated in Europe. Subsequent arrivals came primarily from the Caribbean, South and East Asia, and the Middle East. As the authors note, economic crises, increased racial and ethnic conflict, and other difficulties have resulted today in a “global city” that, like the rest of the globe, “remains beset with conflict.”

Although there have been a large number of studies of New York’s racial and ethnic groups in the past, *All the Nations under Heaven* is the first attempt to survey that scholarship in order to present a comprehensive overview. Even though the authors have synthesized the findings of innumerable studies, they have produced a *narrative* history in the best sense. To their credit they have studiously avoided the graphs, piecharts, and other scholarly paraphernalia that often punctuate studies of

ethnic and racial groups, but have not lost any of the precision that such devices bring to academic studies.

All the Nations under Heaven works best when covering the social, political, and economic aspects of the lives of New York’s ethnic and racial population. It falters in other areas, such as the cultural experiences and contributions of these groups. The authors are also limited by their bird’s-eye view of New York history. While this approach enables them to delineate the story of the city’s ethnic and racial groups in broad brush strokes, it simultaneously constrains their abilities to discuss the lives of significant individuals in any detail or to delve into the different experiences of the members of the groups, such as those of women or children. (In all fairness, however, the authors do acknowledge these weaknesses in their preface.)

An informative, well organized, and compellingly written book, *All the Nations under Heaven* would appeal to a broad range of readers interested in ethnic, racial, and urban history.

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