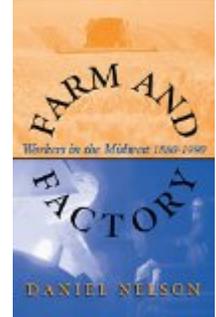


**Daniel Nelson.** *Farm and Factory: Workers in the Midwest, 1880-1990.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. ix + 258 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-32883-0.



**Reviewed by** Phillip G. Payne

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Daniel Nelson's *Farm and Factory: Workers in the Midwest, 1880-1990* is an examination of work, broadly defined, over the past century or so. *Farm and Factory* is part of the Midwestern History and Culture series edited by James H. Madison and Thomas J. Schlereth from Indiana University Press. Like other authors in the series, in *Farm and Factory* Nelson takes a thematic approach to Midwestern history, in this case examining the labor history of the region. Nelson searches for a common thread to the Midwestern work experience and in the process produces a substantial contribution to regional history: "My essential argument is that a commonality of experience overshadows geographic and other distinctions. The essential feature of the region's labor history that set it apart from other American regions was the sustained simultaneous growth of agriculture and industry, a feature that produced notable patterns of individual mobility and that left a distinctive and inescapable heritage" (p. vii). In the Midwest, industry did not supplant agriculture, as it did in the South and New England, and so people migrated to the region in search of work rather than moving to other parts of the country.

In the Midwest workers developed a strong, distinctive "voice" in the form of labor unions and farm activism that also set the Midwest apart from other regions.

This book is one of the better efforts in a good series. By defining work and region broadly, Nelson does a service to his topic, recognizing two important aspects of the region's history: the growth of both farm and factory and the unfolding national changes that made the Midwest the economic heart of the nation. Certainly the industrial and economic transformations were complex and sometimes painful, but the Midwest was at the forefront of business, technological, and labor innovations in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The parallel treatment of farmers and industrial workers provides interesting contrasts and comparisons. Nelson also includes a good examination of white-collar workers, a group often neglected by labor historians. Service producers such as attorneys and bankers dominated public life between 1880 and 1900, but after 1900, industrial executives replaced them as the dominant

group. Both classes were, however, important in the emerging industrial economy.

*Farm and Factory* suffers from the same malady that affects other books in the series; how does one define the Midwest? The Midwest is not as easily geographically defined as other regions, and Nelson sidesteps the issue a bit, focusing mainly on the states from the old Northwest Territory. Yet other scholars have included many more states in their Midwest. Would Nelson's thesis have changed if he had focused more on Kansas and Oklahoma? Another issue that confronts historians of the Midwest is chronology. There exists within the growing literature no important historical watersheds or eras beyond those typically assigned to the nation as a whole. One might contrast this absence of Midwestern markers with those identified for Southern history by scholars such as C. Vann Woodward.

Nelson examines the impact of technology and economic change on the lives of workers and farmers, but he has little to say about popular culture. Immigrants from Europe and migrants from the South certainly played a large role in the development of public culture. Nelson is to be applauded for covering the period through 1990, but a deeper examination of the economic decline of the past fifteen years would be interesting. The uncertainties in industry could result in the Midwest losing its economic distinctiveness. The author recognizes this when he asks, "will this pattern affect the character of work and innovation in the future? Will the Midwest remain a distinctive region of the United States?" (p. 205). *Farm and Factory* is also based primarily on secondary literature; a survey of the footnotes indicates a weakness in the area of Midwestern history. Furthermore, with such extensive endnotes in this book, a bibliography would have been helpful and a valuable resource.

The foregoing is not meant to diminish an impressive book, but to point to the need for additional work in the area. *Farm and Factory* pro-

vides insight that historians from many disciplines can appreciate. Nelson combines the broad sweep of history with fresh insights gained from local studies. In short, he successfully synthesizes much of the existing literature on the labor history of the region.

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