

Chad Berry. *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000. 236 pp. \$44.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-06841-6.



Reviewed by Randal Maurice Jelks

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The Great White Migration: The Southernization of America

Chad Berry sets out to dispel the stereotypical image of the dysfunctional white southerner that migrated from the South in great droves to the upper Midwest. The historical reality of upland Southerners are not to be found in the Clampetts--Jethro, Ellie Mae, Granny and Jed--with their country ways heading to Beverly Hills, California. Nor is it to be found in the consistent labeling of white southerners as a "public nuisance through violence, fecundity, intoxication, laziness, and squalor" (p. 6). According to Berry, the historical reality of white migrants is of a people fleeing the poverty of the rural South. These southerners were hard working people who left the South and transformed the fortunes of their families through hard work and difficult circumstances in the Midwest. He tells us a story of a people who transform the upper Midwestern landscape through demographic shifts, culture and cultural institutions. The reality of white southern migration was the push and pull of social changes oc-

curing throughout the country between World War I and 1960.

Berry's history is a story of deracination--a rooted people torn by a love of the land and the culture and the struggle to find economic security. For him, this is a social history told from a sympathetic point of view--his grandparents were white southerners who made their way to the upper Midwest. He sees white southerners like his grandparents as having a spiritual bond to the South that they are forced to leave and endure cultural bigotry in the North to make a better life for themselves, hence the title of his book *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles*.

Berry's book has a three part structure. In the first part, he describes the white migration before the Great Depression. He then tells the pivotal story of how the Great Depression affected white southern out-migration as well as the policy effects of the New Deal on out-migration. He uses the New Deal and the Great Depression to tell some of the unintended consequences of New Deal social policies on the South in general and white southerners in particular. In the last phase

of the book, he describes the tremendous affects that the post-war years had on white southerners as they found stability in their lives in the upper Midwest.

This historical account is an important and crucial part of the story of the transformation of twentieth century America that has been overlooked. Far more frequently, the story of black southerners have been recounted, while the equally important story of white southerners who fled the same forces that black southerners faced in terms of the limited economic opportunity in the rural South has been neglected. Berry traces these white southerners to Akron, Flint, Benton Harbor, Detroit, Michigan City, Indiana, and Chicago as they attempted to find work, create viable colonies and keep ties to home and family in the South. The cities of Akron, Ohio and Flint, Michigan were two municipalities where white Southern in migration was numerically strong. The number of migrants attracted to those two destinations totalled well over fifty percent (p. 34).

Influencing the departure of white southerners from the upland South in addition to the pull of the Northern industrializing economy, was the push of the growing southern population. Berry writes, "that the southern birthrate--particularly in the highlands--was the nation's highest. In the southern Appalachians, the excess of births over deaths was greater than two per year for each hundred people. Had the region's population been undisturbed by migration before the Great Depression, it would have increased by more than 2 percent each year" (p. 38). This symbiosis of demographic factors in the South and the need for cheap labor in the North greatly influenced the out migration of white southerners before the Great Depression.

To the dismay of industrial owners at the time, and later labor historians, Berry informs us that white southerners were not all anti-union. While it is true that white southerners were slow to join the unions, they nevertheless grew to sup-

port union activity as passionately as they supported their local churches. However, this support for union activities did not diminish their anti-communist leanings and racist beliefs that black southerners should not mix with whites (p. 48). While racism diminished union support at times, self-interest and better working conditions kept many white southerners linked to organized labor.

If white southerners were not the pariahs that some social scientists and historians have made them out to be, then they were certainly the victims in Berry's estimation of cultural discrimination and bigotry throughout the Midwest. He shows that white southerners were frequently scorned just as black southerners. They suffered the condescension of white ethnics who loathed the employment of white southerners instead of their fellow ethnic members (p. 50). Midwestern whites accused them of being cheap and landlords often charged them more rent out of fear that white southerners might be harboring more than one family in their apartment or house (p. 51). At the same time, white southerners resented and formed nativistic attitudes towards white ethnics.

The advent of the Great Depression extended the views of Midwestern whites into local ordinances, known as settlement laws, passed throughout the upper Midwest to keep migrants from applying for relief rolls. "In 1931, Wisconsin, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio all had one-year residency requirements before a person could apply for public relief. Nine years later, Illinois and Indiana had changed their laws to three years; in Illinois a relief applicant had to live at least three years in the municipality, and in Indiana an applicant had to reside at least one of the three years in the same township" (p. 61). These local laws were in direct opposition to the trends occurring nationally through the policy of the New Deal. Berry points out that some of the agricultural policies of the National Recovery Administration

(NRA) forced sharecroppers, tenant farmers and farmers off their land forcing these people to look for employment in the industrial sectors (p. 68). It was not until the Tolan Committee, headed by Representative John H. Tolan of California that the plights of white southerners were discovered nationally (p. 74).

The involvement of the United States in World War II was the great watershed in the lives of white southerners just as it was for people throughout the nation. The War and the benefits received during the post-war years allowed white southerners to find some permanency and stability in the industrial order of the Midwest. In the aftermath of the war, white southerners made their greatest inroads into the Midwest through employment in the automobile industry, the benefits of the GI Bill, and a more open attitude on the part of white Midwesterners toward white Southerners.

This stability attracted white southerners in record numbers. Between 1945 and 1960 the great white migration would be conjoined with the great black migration in the movement of former agricultural workers to the Northern economic boom. The numbers of white southerners grew so rapidly that the city of Ypsilanti, Michigan began to be called "Ypsitucky" (p. 114). Kinship networks, corporate paternalism and the advantages of whiteness allowed white southerners to secure a more favorable place in the pecking order of those to be hired in the plants of the region.

Economic stability allowed white southerners a place to transform the culture of the Midwest. Berry acknowledges that white southerners brought their conception of racial superiority with them, but he also tell us how they brought the conception of religion as well. He explains that the "spread of Southern Baptist churches in the Midwest and the country as a whole was no doubt due to southerners wanting to create their own churches in their new communities" (p. 149). He describes the place of country music in the life

of the migrant helping them to deal with homesickness and loneliness. In addition, the rise of country music became one of the central music played on radio stations throughout the Midwest.

Berry is to be highly commended for several things. He is to be applauded for dispelling myths about white southerners and his attempt to allow their voices to be heard through the regional history of the Midwest. Commendation also ought to be given to him for telling the other side of the Great Migration. The Great Migration was not solely a phenomenon of black southerners facing racial injustice and dislocation, but the regional phenomenon of the South as a whole. His scholarly contribution helps us to see the complex relationship and symbiosis that southern culture had on the culture of the Midwest. His description of white southern religious, saloon, and musical culture is enriching.

If there is an area where Berry's book should be criticized is that it lacks daring in pointing us to future historical scholarship particularly in terms of his political assessments. While he does a great deal to debunk stereotypes of white southerners he does not offer us anything greater. The material that supports his argument raises far larger questions for historians to gage. If white southerners assumed a cultural importance in the Midwest in the post World War II years, what impact did their large presence have on such issues as busing in the Midwest? Did white ethnics and white southerners coalesce in racial sentiments and in the politics of anti-busing that were prominent in the region during the 1970s? Did the breakup of the old New Deal coalition of blacks, white southerners and white ethnics result from the alignment with southerners around race? What was the impact of southern Protestantism, particularly in southern dominated denominations of Southern Baptists and Pentecostals (Assembly of God), upon the Midwest? Was there a decidedly more political conservative and more fundamentalist theological element added to the

old Yankee Protestantism by the presence of white southerners? And what of the two southerners, black and white; did their shared southern culture help them to foster any interesting cultural unions or political coalitions? Lastly, if white southerners were exiles, what accounts for their being a part of the seemingly chosen in the Midwest over the last fifty years? In addressing at least some of these questions Berry might have engaged scholars like Jacqueline Jones and others in trying to measure the wider impact of southern migration in our national history.

Although, I think that Berry could have been more assertive in pointing us to future scholarship this book is nevertheless important and should be read and discussed as historians talk about the Great Migration of southerners as a whole from South to the North in the twentieth century.

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