

**Capeci, Dominic J., Jr. *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984. Pp. xi, 240. Map, index. \$37.95**

Robert D. Parmet

Volume 14, Number 1, June 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017898ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017898ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Parmet, R. D. (1985). Review of [Capeci, Dominic J., Jr. *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984. Pp. xi, 240. Map, index. \$37.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 14(1), 86–87.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1017898ar>

of crime and the degree of cooperation they encounter in these different areas: not surprisingly, police officers tend to conclude that the crimes are more "anti-social" and the population more antagonistic in "trouble areas" than they are elsewhere in the city. The problem of policing of the downtown, in particular, has spawned a High Complaint Unit to act as a regular support to the routine police patrol in that area, and, in the final chapter, McGahan reports that the officers of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary appear to be becoming resigned to the inevitability of having to carry arms (which that force has not routinely had to do since its establishment in 1895). The perception overall of the urban environment in St. John's is that the city is becoming more "metropolitan" and that it will thereby encounter many of the problems of policing that occur on mainland North America.

McGahan's study, as should be obvious, is primarily a piece of reportage, summarising and interpreting a series of interviews with practising police officers. As such, it has its interest, particularly for anyone with even a passing knowledge of the city of St. John's. Beyond that, its value is more questionable. Even the most casual visitor to Newfoundland will conclude that the Province is quite different from the rest of Canada, and that any generalisation to Canada from studies undertaken there would be quite perilous. The suspicion must be, for example, that one would not encounter the same level of knowledge of urban areas and neighbourhoods and their residents among police in the capital cities of Alberta and Ontario as is reported for police in St. John's. McGahan spends too little time here in accentuating the cultural specificity of Newfoundland in general and St. John's in particular.

McGahan also offers us a study that is devoid of any obvious theoretical curiosity, and of any concern to relate his findings to other related empirical work. There is certainly no sense here of any of the recent work of David Harvey, Manuel Castells, Michael Harloe and Peter Saunders on the political economy of the city and, in Harvey in particular, the dynamics of spatial segregation. There is no reference to the attempts of scholars elsewhere (like John Baldwin and Tony Bottoms in their study of "problem estates" in Sheffield, England) to *explore and interrogate* the logics whereby different areas acquire different "reputations" and the way in which reputations are sustained and elaborated or possibly qualified, even down to the level of individual streets. These logics, of course, involve the in-depth study of local culture (including its folklore) over time, and cannot be read off from a small number of interviews, especially when the interviewees' perceptions may be so systematically "correctionalist" or antagonistic as those of police officers. Such studies must be aware, indeed, of the existence (and relative autonomy) of *conflicting* definitions of a city amongst its different classes and vis-à-vis urban authority. And it is only after understanding the "complex totality" of the city that one can sensibly advance what might be more *effective, pop-*

*ular, and responsive* ways of policing its different parts. Sadly, none of these considerations — vital as they are to debates in urban sociology and in political disputes over city policing in Britain and in some parts of the United States — emerge from McGahan's essentially journalistic study.

Ian Taylor  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Carleton University

---

Capeci, Dominic J., Jr. *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984. Pp. xi, 240. Map, index. \$37.95.

In *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit*, Dominic Capeci, Jr. turns his attention from the Harlem race riot of 1943, the subject of a 1977 study, to the Detroit housing controversy and riot of 1942. The immediate cause of conflict in the Motor City was a contest between Blacks and Poles for occupancy of the federally constructed Sojourner Truth Homes, which were built to remedy a shortage of housing for defense workers. Named for a famed Black abolitionist, the initial implication was that the two hundred units would be occupied by Blacks. However, yielding to pressure from unscrupulous realty and political interests, federal officials reassigned the project to Whites, which prompted a Black protest under the battle cry, "We Shall Not Be Moved." Led by their Sojourner Truth Citizens Committee, the protestors succeeded in having the project reassigned back to the Blacks. On February 28, 1942 Whites touched off a riot as they attempted to prevent the first Blacks from moving into their homes.

Capeci's tightly written, highly detailed account is essentially a search for meaning beneath the surface protest. In order to uncover the root causes of the controversy, he devotes his first four chapters, almost a third of the text, to a history of Detroit's race relations, mayoral politics and economic development in the era between the world wars. These pages are fascinating. They reveal a changing, troubled city. Detroit had racial segregation that was maintained "by custom, law, and violence," political leadership that was too limited in stature to appreciate and solve new problems, and great differences between the living standards of Whites and Blacks. With regard to racial conflict, Capeci demonstrates its prevalence before the Sojourner Truth explosion, in 1940 at the Belle Isle recreation area and in 1941 at the Northwestern and Lincoln High Schools. Interracial violence was clearly on the rise as 1942 approached.

Capeci carefully delineates the elements and issues involved in the Sojourner Truth dispute itself. In turn he

describes the roles played by extremists on the right and left. They entered the fray, but more important than their activity, as he explains, was the problem of housing defense workers. "As in Harlem during the Depression, Blacks used Communists and fellow travellers," Capeci notes, "as catalysts, organizers, and recruiters — to advance their protest." There were genuine Black grievances, and to redress them the more traditional NAACP gained far more recruits than the Communist Party.

In seeking democracy for themselves, Detroit's Blacks recognized the value of patriotism. "Drawing on rhetoric and principles that pitted egalitarian democracies at home against racist dictatorships abroad," Capeci observes, "they embraced a Double V strategy — Victory at Home, Victory Abroad." They applied that strategy directly to the housing dispute, but it was likewise applicable to such other affronts as racially segregated Red Cross blood banks, twenty-five per cent Black unemployment in 1943, and continuing racism that "relegated Blacks . . . to nonindustrial or low-paying industrial work." Moreover, Washington seemed unconcerned. With regard to the Sojourner Truth controversy, President Roosevelt left its resolution to subordinates rather than intervene directly.

Eventually the Blacks won their battle and moved into their homes, but their war in Detroit was not over. "The fuse ignited by the Sojourner Truth fight led to several explosions over the next year and a half — most devastatingly on June 20, 1943, when Detroit burst into the worst race riot of the war." Based mainly on archival sources, *Race Relations in Detroit* is an important study with implications that extend to the present.

Robert D. Parmet  
Department of History and Philosophy  
York College  
City University of New York

---

Couvares, Francis G. *The Remaking of Pittsburgh: Class and Culture in an Industrializing City, 1877-1919*. Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1984. Pp. viii, 187. Map, index.

This is a slender but well presented volume in the SUNY Series in American Social History which appears under the general editorship of Charles Stephenson and Elizabeth Pleck. The author is an Assistant Professor of History and American Studies at Amherst College. The volume itself consists of several related essays on the cultural evolution of a major American industrial city from 1877, a year of major labour unrest to the end of World War I. The heart of the book concentrates on the decades on either side of the turn-

of-the-century. The dates isolate a basic reversal in the city's response to labour organization. During the year of turmoil, 1877, Pittsburgh was pro-labour. By 1919 the city fiercely repudiated the labour movement. En route, Pittsburgh became transformed from a "plebeian community" of industrial workers and petty citizens who held and shared power over their own lives to a "grim metropolis" where the people had been completely mastered and intimidated by big steel. The earlier work of historians such as Herbert Gutman is evident as Couvares probes popular culture and local community in his effort to define the shape of class consciousness during the period under consideration. He addresses temperance, leisure and local politics, all successfully but some more so than others.

The most important change during the period was technological; Pittsburgh ceased being an iron city and became one of steel. The implications were revolutionary. Craftsmen virtually controlled the production of iron. Skilled "puddlers" presided personally over the critical stage in the production of iron. The technology of the day prevented them from being replaced by machines or unskilled labourers. Therefore, as long as iron remained king, the craftsmen ruled regardless of the views of ownership. As for management, the puddlers obscured the dividing lines by being the organizers of their own production teams. These units frequently consisted of the puddler's sons and nephews, young men being prepared for leading roles in this "craftsmen empire."

What was true in the mills, we are told, was likewise true in the city. Plebeian culture and politics reinforced working-class power and solidarity. With the Bessemer process Big Steel swept all of this away. Massive immigration, the proletarianization of the work force, and the reorganization of urban space, shattered Pittsburgh's sense of itself as a community. These technological clauses and the over-supply of foreign (non-union) labour diminished the status and income of skilled workers, provided greater opportunities and income for the unskilled (from their point of view), created a managerial class, and made masters out of owners. In the process came suburbia, redevelopment, and reform impulses. The last took the form of enforcing restrictive laws upon the lower class, thus replacing the old plebeian struggles for self improvement. In the end, middle-class Protestants persisted in trying to impose their views on the working-class Catholics. Though the story is a familiar one, the clear explanation of technology's role provides additional insight.

Less fully developed is the political dimension. The presumed masters of plebeian politics are neither clearly identified nor defined. That someone ran things is assumed because political events took place. Couvares projects a wholesome character upon the undefined political functionaries, apparently because the environment in which they operated was wholesome. Perhaps the difficulty in coming to grips with those who performed political functions stems from the amorphous nature of life in the plebeian city. In