



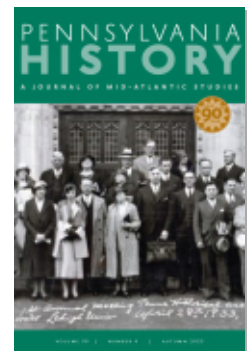
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*Grassroots Leviathan: Agricultural Reform and the Rural
North in the Slaveholding Republic* by Ariel Ron (review)

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Thomas Hamblin, manager of the Bowery Theatre. Further complicating her early public persona was her mother's associations with the sex trade. Taking her career into her own hands, Clifton traveled to England to seek professional approval from English audiences so as to be able to return to America and negotiate a new identity. After her successful return, she sought new dramas that suited her talents. She achieved much success only to have her career brought low again by yet another scandal not of her making but which included her in its cast of characters. Her story involves many impressive episodes that reveal an ambitious, talented, savvy professional who, like the other starring women of Lampert's study, was forever at risk of forces beyond her control, forces that insisted on reading her through the lens of a moralizing press and public, and through the roles she performed on stage.

Lampert is quick to note the efforts by critics of the time and in the several decades following to consistently frame their valuation of her starring women's stories based on their "narrow gendered tastes" (39). In her concluding chapters, she also notes that her later starring women drew increasingly large female audiences, further complicating how starring women negotiated the borders of society's "respectability politics" (18). Lampert's study is well researched, clearly and concisely argued, offering a valuable contribution to the study of antebellum American theatre and the emergence of American cultural identity. Its only weakness is an assumption that the reader is fully aware of the course of American history. References to President Jackson and "new nationalism" (94), for example, could have been more fully explained and the study never acknowledges that America was a slave-owning nation, an oversight in a study that leans heavily on a discussion of genteel white womanhood.

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Ariel Ron. *Grassroots Leviathan: Agricultural Reform and the Rural North in the Slaveholding Republic*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. Pp. 308. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Hardcover, \$59.95.

In *Grassroots Leviathan: Agricultural Reform and the Rural North in the Slaveholding Republic*, author Ariel Ron reexamines the rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s by turning his scholarly attention to the agricultural

communities of the North. It is there, Ron argues, that historians can better understand the Republican Party coalition and its ability to surpass the entrenched powers that made up the slaveholding republic in the decades that predated the Civil War.

Ron argues that too much historiographical weight has been given to the “free labor” ideology—a political philosophy that has placed far more significance on the concerns of industrial workers over those of the agriculturists. Such arguments might make sense a few decades later in the midst of the Gilded Age but not in the 1850s. After all, the American population in the antebellum era was overwhelming rural and decidedly agricultural. *Grassroots Leviathan* outlines how agriculturists in the rural north shaped the political landscape of the 1850s through—of all things—agricultural reform movements. Ron states, “This book shifts attention from industrialization to agricultural development. It shows how northern, middle-class farmers and rural businessmen built an enormous agricultural reform movement, keyed to the slogan of ‘scientific agriculture,’ that they used to institutionalize their presence in a reimagined state apparatus” (5). Look to northern farms, Ron argues, that is where historians can best understand the rapid rise of the Republican Party as well as the foundational legislation that defines the Civil War—era party.

The agricultural reform movement of the 1850s may seem like an unlikely place to track political developments at first glance. Farmers formed societies, they subscribed to agricultural journals, and began meeting at state and local conventions. Though these may not seem like explicitly political acts, the collective power of these novel and organizational actions bound rural northerners together to form what Ron identifies as nonpartisan anti-politics. Ron writes, “Agricultural reformers insisted that farmers had a uniquely legitimate claim on the collective resources of the republic but shunned the partisan arena that contemporaries equated with politics itself” (7). Rarely did these societies, presses, or conventions endorse specific parties or candidates; however, the collective message across the venues provided agriculturalists a clear vision of their role in the republic. As the 1850s progressed, agriculturists in the rural north expressed a clear political imperative that ultimately pressed the Republican Party, and the federal government, to enact particular policies that embodied the reforming impulses of the preceding decade. The influence of these nonpartisan anti-politics can best be seen with the passage of the first, major federal policies enacted *during* the Civil War—the creation of the United States Department of Agriculture and the passage of the Morrill

Land Grant Act. These bills were not anomalies. Ron states, “They were the culmination of a decade-long campaign powered by a massive agricultural reform movement that had been building up in the North since the early national period” (5).

Grassroots Leviathan will appeal to those interested in the history of agricultural reform in Pennsylvania and how the Keystone State fit into a larger cultural, environmental, and political movement in the mid-nineteenth century. Like their counterparts in other states, farming and agricultural advocates in Pennsylvania formed societies, printed regionally specific journals, and pushed state legislators to take their interests seriously. In fact, the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania (to be known later as Pennsylvania State University) was born amid this 1850s impulse. Agricultural reformers pressed the state government to take a more proactive position in protecting and promoting the interests of Pennsylvania farmers. As Ron notes, “The Agricultural College of Pennsylvania defined itself as an ‘educational,’ ‘practical,’ and ‘experimental’ institution,” that embraced reformers’ desires. The institution was explicitly designed to protect, “the industrial interests of the State, and most especially the agricultural interest” (140). Through nonpartisan anti-politics, agriculturists in Pennsylvania channeled the same energies coursing through the rural north to impress on their governments an explicit desire to expand the role of the State in very particular ways.

Grassroots Leviathan is significant not only in the ways it reframes the 1850s but also in how we should understand the political dynamics of the postwar period. Ron demonstrates that the primacy of agricultural reform legislation, not the question of slavery, served as *the* major motivating factor for rural voters. In doing so, he finds clear historical roots to the Patrons of Husbandry, the Farmers’ Alliance, and the new, national coalition of white agriculturalists in the post–Civil War period. “The irony of the Civil War is that, by destroying slavery, it removed a basic obstacle to white solidarity,” Ron observes. “It seems at least possible that the new centering of racism that followed Reconstruction’s demise and accompanied the USDA’s emergence as an exemplar of federal administrative state was predicated on the shifting composition and geographical center of agricultural organizations made possible by the Civil War’s undoing of the master class” (226). By providing a thoughtful examination of the nonpartisan arguments posed by agricultural reformers of the 1850s, Ariel Ron challenges historiographic assumptions about the political developments of antebellum America

while also prompting new questions about the nature of coalitional politics throughout rural America in the Gilded Age.

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Joe William Trotter Jr. *Pittsburgh and The Urban League Movement: A Century of Social Service and Activism*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2020. Pp. 242. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Hardcover, \$60.00.

Joe William Trotter Jr.'s book *Pittsburgh and The Urban League Movement* takes a comprehensive look, spanning one hundred years, at this national organization's work and development in Pittsburgh and surrounding communities. Trotter divides the book into three manageable sections: Part I: Founding and Early History; Part II: The Depression and World War II; and Part III: The Modern Black Freedom Movement and Beyond. In his treatment of the Pittsburgh Urban League, Trotter attempts to put to rest the longstanding debate concerning the loyalties of the organization. Has the organization acted as an advocate for Black middle-class professionals, or has it looked out for the interest of the Black lower-class masses in the fight against racial injustices? To put it more succinctly, has the organization been more Booker T. (as in Washington) or W. E. B. (as in Du Bois)? Although Trotter provides examples of both with Washington's focus on work and training and Du Bois's focus on civil rights, the author seems to fall on the side of Du Bois, making the argument that the social organization, specifically the Pittsburgh branch, has always been in the equality fight for African Americans.

In stature, one can argue the National Urban League, founded in 1910, has taken a backseat to the NAACP, the premier civil rights organization, founded the previous year. Much of that could be the result of how the Urban League historically has been perceived by some—an organization more focused on the economic uplift of professional African Americans as opposed to one engaged in social activities to meet the moment. Trotter raises these concerns and ultimately spends much of the book disabusing those notions, using the Pittsburgh branch. He writes, “the Urban League of Pittsburgh consistently merged social science research and professional social