

## Book Review: Structuring Poverty in the Windy City: Autonomy, Virtue, and Isolation in Post Fire Chicago by Joel E. Black

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### Recommended Citation

Lepley, John W. () "Book Review: Structuring Poverty in the Windy City: Autonomy, Virtue, and Isolation in Post Fire Chicago by Joel E. Black," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 97 : Iss. 3 , Article 11. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol97/iss3/11>

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**Black, Joel E. *Structuring Poverty in the Windy City: Autonomy, Virtue, and Isolation in Post Fire Chicago*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. 259 pages. Paperback, \$24.95.**

In *Structuring Poverty in the Windy City*, Joel E. Black asks how reformers, social scientists, and journalists in Chicago established authority in the aftermath of the 1871 fire. The “Windy City” casts a large shadow in Gilded Age and Progressive Era historiography; to invoke Carl Sandburg, it is a “City of the Big Shoulders” within those fields. In that spirit, this monograph cuts across administrative, labor, legal, social, and urban history. Black, a lecturer in Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Florida, adapted *Structuring Poverty* from his doctoral dissertation. It is a good, concise contribution to literature about Chicago from the Gilded Age to the New Deal.

The thesis of *Structuring Poverty* is that reformers, social scientists, and journalists organized their critiques of the poor around the “compulsions” autonomy, virtue, and isolation. Black develops this argument in five chapters of comparable length. The first two discuss the relationship of vagrancy law to the jobless and homeless. Overlapping ideas, institutions, and individuals tried to make sense of the poor who inhabited the city and defied expectations that white men ought to be autonomous and self-sufficient. For example, on the one hand, journalist Robert Hunter wrote a sympathetic treatment of Chicago slums that echoed Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*; on the other hand, the Court of Domestic Relations, established in 1911, became a regular venue for the administration of poverty and family life. In fact, nearly two-thirds of the 3,699 cases it handled in its second year involved desertion and abandonment issues. As Black notes, the Court applied social science methodologies to fulfill its mission. “Mothers and wives in the antechamber were invited to fill out questionnaires designed to help municipal court officials better understand the causes of domestic breakdown,” he writes. (p. 40)

The third chapter, “Virtue: Trading in Sex and Wages,” documents how the triumvirate of reformers, social scientists, and journalists negotiated their ideals of womanhood with the day-to-day realities of poor and working-class women. For instance, a 1910 study by the Chicago Vice Commission identified low wages as a cause of prostitution and discussed casual sex workers who supplemented their low earnings from legitimate employers. Later, Black examines court records that show the ambiguity with which some judges decided prostitution cases. While they believed that casual sex workers could be redeemed through domestic work, “professional prostitutes” received no such leniency. In short, *virtue* regulated women just as *autonomy* ordered the lives of unemployed white men. Power and space are prominent threads throughout this chapter. In 1913, the Chicago police department hired ten female officers to protect women in public areas, including beaches, parks, dance halls, and playgrounds. Here, Black also mentions the University of Chicago and its social work program, although he neither mentions nor cites Robyn Muncy’s landmark *Creating a Female Dominion in Reform, 1890-1935*, a curious omission given how much the two works overlap in periodization and subject matter.

*Structuring Poverty* closes with an analysis of a third compulsion, *isolation*. These two chapters throw cold water on uplifting narratives of the Great Migration of African Americans from the South. Black describes the several methods by which custom and law prevented African Americans from full, equal participation in daily life. Chicago labor unions’ exclusion of African Americans resulted in the latter serving as strikebreakers in numerous labor disputes. At the same time, new organizations like the Chicago Urban League and *Chicago Defender* advocated on behalf of the migrants in the face of systemic racism in housing, employment, and law, among other places.

Good history requires deep archival research, and Black delivers on that count. Historians will appreciate his examination of the administrative and legal bodies that developed in response to rapid industrialization and urbanization. One shortcoming of this monograph is its narrow context; in particular, Black devotes little space to the backgrounds and motivations of the reformers, social scientists, and journalists who understood poverty through autonomy, virtue, and isolation. As he explains, much of their work occurred within the context of “liberty of contract” ideas. However, Gilded Age and Progressive Era historians frequently cite the impact that occupational professionalization had on middle and upper-class reformers, something that Black does not consider. Notwithstanding from this quibble, *Structuring Poverty* would be a good text for graduate level courses in legal history, Chicago, Gilded Age and Progressive Era, and urban studies. It complements several new and past works, including Thomas Sugrue’s *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Anya Jabour’s recent *Sophonisba Breckenridge*, Kathy Piess’s *Cheap Amusements*, and Tobias Higbie’s *Indispensable Outcasts*. Significantly, this monograph should direct scholars’ attention to the relationship between law and society. Structures do not build themselves, but are erected by people with ideas, power, and influence.

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