

*The Racketeer's Progress: Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy, 1900–1940.* By Andrew Wender Cohen. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xviii + 333 pp. Photographs, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$60. ISBN: 0-521-83466-x.

Reviewed by Elliott J. Gorn

*The Racketeer's Progress* is an ambitious book, and that ambitiousness is announced by author Andrew Wender Cohen in the first sentence of his introduction: "Between the Progressive Era and the New Deal, small businessmen and craft workers in Chicago defied the corporate transformation of American capitalism, redirecting the course of American political and economic development." Cohen declares that small businesses, unions, politicians, and tradesmen created a world in which they enforced their own codes and rules (cooperatively if possible, with strikes and threats and violence if necessary) in opposition to the ideas and desires of the city's corporations, railroads, and big retailers. "Their opposition," he goes on, "provoked a series of violent confrontations between local craftsmen and corporate magnates that spilled into the city's streets, markets, and courts." Modernizing the economy was not a smooth process—it was "violent, contingent, and contested." Powerful labor organizations, which occasionally resorted to tactics like bombings and beatings, prevented national corporations from wholly imposing their will on Chicago; such labor activism also provided the template for federal practices during the New Deal.

Cohen goes on to contest five ideas he says dominate historians' interpretation of the early twentieth century. *Modernity* implies that the American economy, along with the state and society, had attained maturity by the Progressive Era; that incorporation, technology, mechanization, and free markets had transformed the nation. In fact, large segments of Chicago were still "premodern," in the sense that many workers remained ensconced in small-scale firms where their muscle, knowledge, and skill gave them considerable power. Cohen also questions the value of historical *synthesis* for understanding this era. Historians in recent years have called for broad national and international histories, but Cohen argues that the smoothing away of details involved in

such a project fundamentally distorts history. Close examination of a locale such as Chicago makes it clear that the experiences of workers, owners, and managers are only understood through a closely detailed approach.

Cohen also questions the validity of *voluntarism*, by which he means the notion that labor unions joined an implicit voluntary compact with business, focusing on bread-and-butter issues, eschewing legislative reforms and political organizing, accepting the validity of contracts with companies. On the contrary, those who labored outside corporations, such as teamsters, painters, janitors, repairmen, teachers, and workers in a wide range of other trades retained intimate ties to politics; they formed all sorts of organizations to enforce their assumptions about decent wages and proper working conditions; and they did their best to test the boundaries of laws and judicial decisions inimical to their interests. Above all, craft organizations strove to organize and enforce rules for wages, hours, and prices, and they hired “walking delegates” to police work sites around the city and check for nonunion workers or banned machinery or scab materials. Cohen further argues that these craft organizations constituted a serious threat to corporations operating in Chicago, for they implicitly denied the legitimacy of untrammelled free markets. Craft unions had immense power to rule their trades, power that threatened the hegemony of big business.

This associational strength of the craft economy provided the pattern for much New Deal reform. Cohen believes that the *corporatism* ascribed to business statesmen is highly overblown. Most business leaders consistently opposed government regulation of the economy and of labor relations. It was the multitude of craft organizations, intervening between workers and businesses, that offered the precedents for New Deal policies. Ironically, the very concept of racketeering—a legal term introduced at the end of the 1920s meaning the use of graft, violence, and manipulation to gain one’s ends—was invented to tar the craft unions with the brush of corruption, even as the policies and practices of those unions inspired important parts of the New Deal. It makes sense, then, that Cohen rejects the rise of new industrial unions under the New Deal as a story of “the ascent of organized labor from ‘conspiracy to collective bargaining,’” or as a narrative of the new-found *legitimacy* of the labor movement replacing the chaos and fraud of the old craft unions. On the contrary, the opponents of labor worked both sides of the law—

bashing unions as conspiracies, and where that failed, bashing them for racketeering. But Cohen argues that with the adoption of New Deal labor policies, the craft unions won a crucial victory over the corporatist vision of absolute property rights: “After four decades of conflict, the modern legal order ironically legitimized the culture of the least industrial, least national, and least corporate sectors of the American economy. In doing so, the United States government validated the continuing defiance of craft producers and their struggle for order” (p. 10).

The claims that New Deal labor policies flowed out of the craft organizations seem more than a little overblown, and they are certainly not well supported by the chapter Cohen provides to make this case. The book overreaches more than a little and claims for the centrality of its subject seem a tad grandiose. But like Elizabeth Cohen’s *Making a New Deal*, which covers some of the same ground during the same era in the same city, this *is* an important work. If *The Racketeer’s Progress* exaggerates the singularity of historians’ focus on the great corporations in the context of state and federal regulation, the book gets it right in pointing out that much that was going on in the economy, in law, and in labor organizing took place at the local level, below the radar, so to speak. The world down there looked very different from the realm controlled by United States Steel; furthermore, that local arena retained surprising amounts of independence and power.

*The Racketeer’s Progress* is especially good at tracing the development of law out of local cases and practices. Cohen follows the ins and outs of judicial decisions whose origins were obscure but whose implications proved enormous. By showing that the concept of “racketeering” was constructed by particular individuals for particular purposes, he reveals how old practices, developed in the flow of daily working life, made sense from the point of view of workers determined to preserve their livelihoods. But even when they were operating beyond the reach of the law, workers were able to achieve informal enforcement of labor agreements and customary practices. The chapters describing these strategies are very convincing. Cohen allows us to appreciate how workers in a whole range of jobs—he is especially strong on teamsters and the building trades—found ways to secure their skills and even to pass on their positions to succeeding generations. The devil (or God, take your pick) is in the details, and the

details show us men of different skills coping with a rapidly changing economy, new laborers entering the marketplace (Cohen spends a little time on ethnic, racial, and gender tensions in the trades, but I suspect that story deserves more attention than he gives it), businessmen attempting to rationalize old practices, trades organizations battling over jurisdictions, and a host of other conflicts.

For example, a New York corporation got the contract to install six hundred metal doors in the stairwells of a locally owned company. The corporation hired members of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, bringing on protests from the Bridge, Structural and Ornamental Iron Workers Local #63. The conflict was clear—the local cited the decision by a national arbitration organization, set up by various craft unions, to assign such jobs to ironworkers, but the carpenters' right to hang doors had a long history, going back to the days when the doors themselves were constructed at the work site. Local 63 saw a national corporation riding roughshod over a local situation; the carpenters saw new technologies being transferred into the wrong hands (metal doors provided fire protection in skyscrapers), ruining their trade. And this example doesn't begin to give a sense of the complexity of the world Cohen uncovers, including labor's ties to politics, the police, and the courts.

Cohen's claims for understanding the New Deal from the mole's-eye view of the trades organizations is certainly worthy of further research and discussion, but to judge this book on that basis alone misses what is really valuable here. The world Cohen reclaims is too complex, diffuse, and subterranean for us to see it clear and whole, but by building up story after story, by forcing us to look at laws, judicial decisions, informal union practices, politicians' ties to building trades, and a range of other customs and practices, *The Racketeer's Progress* gives us a sense of the complexity and richness of a laboring world in which workers constructed and kept running not just a city but also their own working lives.

*Elliott J. Gorn is professor of history at Brown University. He is the author of Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America (2001).*