

A Nation of Realtors: A Cultural History of the Twentieth-Century American Middle Class. By Jeffrey M. Hornstein. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005. x + 252 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$79.95; paper, \$22.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-822-33528-X; paper, 0-822-33540-9.

Reviewed by Merry Ovnick

Jeffrey Hornstein's *A Nation of Realtors* contributes significantly to not one but three fields of history. Business historians will welcome this study of the real-estate industry's professionalization between the 1880s and the 1950s and its power to affect national housing policies and shape the nation's suburbs. Social historians will find a thoughtful exploration of the making of the middle class. And gender historians will be doubly fascinated by the way early male brokers sought to assert their endangered masculine identity through professionalization, while women brokers from the 1920s through the 1950s negotiated their way past gender barriers to assert a new female identity.

Although Hornstein's thesis statement (pp. 10–11), subtitle, and concluding chapter highlight social class formation, the bulk of the pages and most of the evidence are devoted to rationalizing aspects of the real-estate business, such as its proselytizing for the moral, class, and social meanings ascribed to the single-family residence and its powerful voice in public policymaking.

Hornstein starts with the establishment of local real-estate boards. In 1908 representatives of local boards formed the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB). The author has made extensive use of NAREB records and those of a few local boards. Seeking to elevate public esteem and dependency on the profession in the Progressive Era, NAREB established a code of ethics (1913; modified in 1934 to embrace racial exclusion); "scientific" methods such as multiple listing, state boards, and licensing dominated by members; formal education courses; and a trademarked name—Realtor—for members of affiliated local boards. NAREB's moralistic rhetoric on behalf of home ownership bore fruit in the 1920s when Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover created the Better Homes in America organization to promote efficiency in small-home construction, the market level that was ripe for developing. By the onset of the depression, the bias in favor of single-family residences and against public housing projects had become a mantra that would continue to be repeated throughout the New Deal and the wartime housing crisis that followed, in spite of practical economic arguments. In the postwar period, suburbs of mass-produced tract houses sprawled to the horizons. Although the

author implies a significant role for NAREB and its affiliated local boards in forming the policies of the 1920s to the 1950s, he does not reveal the details of their effective lobbying tactics, but only points out that their viewpoints were represented in speeches given at NAREB conferences, articles written in its journals, and opinions voiced by a handful of NAREB activists who found positions in Washington. Admittedly, NAREB and the local real-estate boards represented only a small percentage of the men and women who made their living selling real estate. Furthermore, the NAREB documents revealed deep divisions of opinion among members on important issues.

The author's research and analysis of NAREB papers and publications contributes new information about how one industry established its reputation and brought a profitable order to a competitive business. While those sources do not reveal the distinctions between the day-to-day operation of NAREB affiliates and those of the majority of real-estate operators who were not members of local or national boards, the study is a valuable complement to Marc A. Weiss's history of the financial side of the real-estate business, *The Rise of the Community Builders: The American Real Estate Industry and Urban Land Planning* (1987).

Hornstein's titular attention to real estate as a means of social-class identity is the most provocative element of the book, though unevenly covered and, in the end, conjectural. He convincingly demonstrates NAREB's consistent promotion of homeownership as a marker of middle-class status and, in the postwar period, as an expected norm. How developers made the shift to low-income and mass-market housing to accommodate the demand they helped to create deserves closer attention, although this development is addressed in part by Greg Hise, *Magnetic Los Angeles: Planning the Twentieth-Century Metropolis* (1997). In the late nineteenth century, home ownership indicated status for a growing middle class. By the 1950s, big mortgages, the G.I. Bill of Rights and other federal programs, and the efficiency of massive tract-building put homes and middle-class membership within reach of almost everyone—at least so it seemed to those who lived in white suburbs and rarely saw anyone but people like themselves. Hornstein believes that the 1960s eruptions of social protest suddenly made this “universal” middle class aware that there were “others” who had to be explained away as somehow deficient. This is an interesting thought that deserves further exploration.

Hornstein gives much attention to male gender anxiety in the early years covered by his study. White-collar brokers compensated for muscularity with a “technocratic masculinity” (p. 118) of expertise in the mysteries of contract language, a paternalistic care of dependent clients, competitive risk-taking, and a mastery of efficient business methods. The home, however, had long been women's domain, and male identity was challenged in the arena of home-selling. This circumstance gave an entry to women, who could claim their own expertise in what would make

an ideal home for clients. The author discovers interesting comparisons between the early male-dominated profession and the female-dominated area of residential sales in the postwar period. Men had formed local boards and the national organization to bolster their redefined masculinity; women's real-estate councils calculated how to use their feminine home-bound domesticity as an entry to real estate and went on to assume the independence and risks and organizational power that were once the marks of manliness. In the early period, the male Realtor had depicted himself as a "creator of homes, a builder of cities, a developer of industries and productive farms" (p. 110); in the postwar period, women Realtors crusaded against public housing policies on the grounds of preserving individualism, freedom, and home sanctity. Men, through the 1930s, fearful of labor radicalism, claimed that home ownership would prevent class warfare. Women Realtors in the cold-war period put their faith in home ownership as the means of opposing international socialism. Early on, men had joined real-estate boards to establish themselves as paragons of virtue in order to best "curbstoners," competitors they painted as disreputable. In the 1940s and 1950s, women presented themselves as the protectors of veterans who, under the G.I. Bill, might be fleeced by unscrupulous (male) real-estate brokers. In a play on cold-war terminology, Hornstein concludes that by selling women clients on the ideals of homemaking and security, women Realtors were responsible for "containing" women in domesticity—while, as professionals, they themselves could enjoy independence from the restrictions imposed by home and marriage (p. 189).

The reader comes away from this book with a solid grounding in the history of the real-estate profession and many challenging ideas about class and gender identity.

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