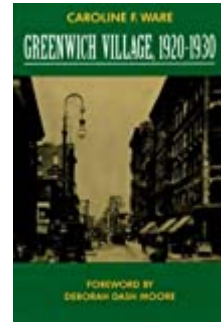


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Caroline Ware. *Greenwich Village 1920-1930: A Comment on American Civilization in the Post-War Years.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. xxv + 496 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-08566-4.



Reviewed by Brett Abrams (American University)

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The bohemian indulging in pleasures within a tea-room, the Italian speakeasy owner, and the Irish political boss and devout Catholic all populated the area of New York City known as Greenwich Village during the Inter-war years. Historian Caroline Ware argues that these wildly disparate people engaged in lifestyles that made the Village the symbol of the repudiation of traditional American values that became prevalent during the roaring 1920s.

On the heels of Helen and Robert Lynd's *Middletown*, an innovative investigation of Muncie, Indiana, interest in understanding the changing character of the United States blossomed. Columbia University's Council for Research in the Social Sciences wanted to investigate Greenwich Village. Ware, a professor at Vassar College, agreed to head this examination of a diverse urban community's culture.

As Ellen Fitzpatrick observes in a recent article on early twentieth century American historiography, Ware and others were "cultural" historians. This group expressed dissatisfaction with both the nineteenth-century scientific history and the New History touted by James Harvey Robinson. Ware defined culture as how the masses had lived, thought, and reacted in the past. This view, similar to that held by social and new labor historians of the 1970s, emphasizes social and economic con-

text, the makeup of the average people, and the interaction of the people with social and economic institutions.

Ware organized the book around three sections. While the "community" focuses on historical residential patterns and the character of business and work in the district, the "people" describes the ethnic character of the groups and their social organizations. The section on "institutions" charts patterns established in politics, religion, education, family, and recreation. The scholar examined the range of social history sources, including maps, census reports, real estate deals, building, transportation, and school records to analyze the conditions of urban living and observe how the changes over the decade prompted changes in living. Ware asserts that industrialization was the key to the disruption of the culture pattern of the nineteenth century during the period between World War I and the Great Depression. The new economic and social contexts that industrialization forged made agrarian individualism less relevant to workers and made the social values of the employing class appear vacuous.

As with many books that use the social history approach, Ware's book is chock-full of details. This material supports the method's aim of tracing some daily activities. The amount of empirical data also prompted some practitioners like Ware to feel highly confident in

the generalizations that they advance. However, this preponderance of detail leads to the perception that one encounters similar material in several chapters. Ware explains on several occasions that the Irish sent their children to parochial schools, and that the Italians filled the public school ranks. She reiterates that the young of both groups did not identify with the ethnic groups that their parents established and sought to leave the Village to improve their economic and social status. This style also gives the reader the sense that they are reading sweeping generalizations about groups without having a specific example of a person to illustrate and illuminate these conclusions.

Histories of “outsider” groups through social and cultural history lenses would challenge Ware’s conclusion about the distinctness of Greenwich Village’s role in repudiating American values. These works have demonstrated that urban areas in a variety of cities developed their own culture that embraced values that were distinctly different from the traditional American ones. Social histories of homosexuals show thriving communities existed in tourist areas of San Francisco and Los Angeles and in other areas of New York City during the late Progressive Era. A cultural history focused on African-Americans in this period revealed thriving black and homosexual communities that embraced distinct values in both New York City and Chicago.

Several of the approaches available in current scholarship would raise questions about Ware’s periodization and focus upon industrialization as the key factor. Works adopting the analytical tool of gender argue for the important roles struggles over the definitions of masculinity and femininity played in the erosion of traditional American values. These works note that two generations of New Women played a large role in eroding Victorian attitudes and standards toward women, and that various

factors questioned the traditional male position. Scholars examining the expansion of commercial culture observe the role of these amusements had in disrupting both the Victorian separate spheres and courtly dating system. All of this scholarship places the roots of the erosion of “traditional” American values in the late nineteenth century.

The adoption of a currently vogue methodological approach would prompt the consideration of a different set of questions than those Ware investigated. A scholar using the recent cultural history presumes that the culture shapes the daily world, so analysis would involve how the culture perceived the district and how that perception shaped the inhabitants’ activities. Thus, one appropriate historical question to analyze would be how did Greenwich Village develop the reputation for being a location for different sexualities? Using sexuality as a category of analysis, the scholar would examine some of the same sources that Ware did, including census data, reform, church, and police records. This would enable the writer to create a geography of public spaces of “deviant” sexual behavior and assess how its policing influenced the construction of the Greenwich Village neighborhood. However, the vast majority of the sources would be cultural materials, including literature, motion pictures and radio programs that present Greenwich Village. Ware’s *Greenwich Village 1920-1930* would prove useful to this scholar in two areas. The work provides details that would help shape the scholar’s geography of the Village. It also raises particular questions that the scholar would address, including what happened to the ethnic groups in the representations of Greenwich Village.

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