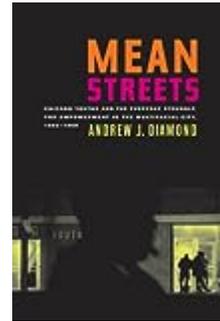


**Andrew J. Diamond.** *Mean Streets: Chicago Youths and the Everyday Struggle for Empowerment in the Multiracial City, 1908-1969.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. xiii + 396 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25723-8; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-25747-4.



**Reviewed by** Dominic Pacyga

**Published on** H-Urban (May, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Wendy Plotkin

## Chicago: City of Youth Gangs

Andrew J. Diamond's ambitious study of Chicago's diverse, and, at times, confusing, collection of street gangs is in many ways a difficult book to review. The author tackles several very different eras in the city's history, while focusing on street gangs. Furthermore, he looks at gangs from a variety of ethnic groups, including Irish, Polish, African American, Puerto Rican, and Mexican. He is also ambitious in his definition of "youth," referring to groups of young men ranging from preteen to their late twenties, and, even, early thirties. Diamond sees male and, later, female youth as having served as activists in the creation of cultures of empowerment in Chicago in the twentieth century. They also played a central role in ethnic identification, acculturation, and the development of race relations.

Diamond begins his study by looking at South Side gangs before the outbreak of the 1919 race riot. In particular, he is interested in the Irish gangs that played such a prominent role in the racial fighting of the period. His chapter "The Generation of 1919" is a deeply nuanced look at the so-called social athletic clubs and

the roles they played not only in defense of their neighborhood turf, but also in their exploration of maleness and relations with both the opposite sex and the growing African American community on the South Side. Diamond also tackles "whiteness" theory, as he explores how youth gangs contributed to the acceptance of various immigrant groups in the "white" world of Chicago. He points out that, in many ways, whiteness and Americanness came to be almost inseparable notions (p. 61). In this way, he is following the lead of both David R. Roediger and James R. Barrett in their studies of assimilation from the bottom up.[1] Diamond points out that the 1919 riot should not be seen as a communal response, but as a means of empowerment.

It does seem to me that Diamond misreads the Polish community's response to the riot. He emphasizes a rather small, thirty-member street gang, the Murderers, instead of noting the relative absence of Polish and East European participants in the riot (which was an assimilating lesson for these groups as they saw how "Americans" treated blacks).[2] Diamond's description

of Polish-Mexican relations in the 1920s, in contrast, is excellent, and supports his theory of racial acceptance.

Diamond's exploration of manhood comes out more fully in the chapter "Between School and Work in the Interwar Years." Here, he discusses the generational divide within ethnic communities and the impact of the new capitalist consumer society on youth culture. Diamond points out that, unlike middle-class youth, working-class young people came into real conflict with their own communities, the state, and the communities of neighboring ethnic and racial groups (p. 69). Much of this conflict had sexual overtones, and it often arose over interracial and interethnic relations in the so-called interzones between the races in big cities. The author does a wonderful job of exploring these issues in the 1920s and 1930s. He portrays the dance hall culture in Chicago, and places it firmly in the context of generational assimilation. *Mean Streets* also examines "swing" culture and the contact between blacks and whites in the world of music and popular culture. Many of the white gangs of Chicago seemed caught between two worlds: the world of their ethnic communities, with their churches, schools, fraternal clubs, and traditions; and the world of the street, with its popular culture and bright lights attractions. Diamond points out that it is within the world of urban leisure that ethnic youths made sense of their place in America's racial system.

The attraction of leisure time activities stands in direct opposition to attitudes toward education. As one Polish gang member said in 1935, "What the Hell good is a diploma? They give you a piece of paper, but it won't give you no job!" (p. 103). In a world marked by unskilled industrial labor and consumerism, education quickly became undervalued. As the work ethic crumbled during the Great Depression, so rose the glamorous image of the gangster. The gangster came to embody the problem of ethnic exclusion from the middle class, and also provided a model of manliness for youth in a city well known for gang rule (p. 113).

As Diamond moves into the World War Two years and beyond, racial conflict again becomes more prevalent. Racial disturbances broke out all over the South Side and West Side as the races faced each other in contested territory. That youth made up the most active component of these riots should not surprise the reader. White gangs of both sexes, now multiethnic and fully American, saw African Americans as major threats to their neighborhoods. Again, youth groups took the lead in the transformation of a city under stress. In describing black Zoot

Suit youths rioting during the war, and white hoodlums attacking black residents in the era after the war, Diamond builds on his basic theme that youth played a crucial role in the racial and class development of Chicago and the American city. It might have done Diamond well to take more account of the assimilating effect of the war on working-class Chicago. Many of these so-called youth found themselves on battlefields across Western Europe and the Pacific. They came home demanding to be part of the white middle-class majority, which before the Depression and war had shunned them.

Diamond also makes an important contribution to understanding the Black Power movement in cities such as Chicago, and the relationship between African American gangs and the movement. His last two chapters deal almost exclusively with minority gangs, particularly African American, Mexican, and Puerto Rican gangs. These groups played a crucial role in raising consciousness among their people and empowering minority neighborhoods. Chicago's black youth provided foot soldiers for the school strikes that rocked the city in the early 1960s and attracted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s attention, thus giving teeth to the Chicago Freedom Movement. The rise of the Black P. Stone Nation, as well as other gangs, is dealt with in these final two chapters. Social class conflicts within black neighborhoods also revolved around the inclusion of gangs in the long civil rights movement. In some ways, these mirrored earlier conflicts between youth gangs and elders in white ethnic communities.

Conflicts between whites and blacks as well as with Hispanics are a central part of Diamond's story, as is the clash between Mexicans and blacks, particularly on the West Side and in South Chicago on the Southeast Side. Mexicans found themselves an "in-between" group that often sided with whites against blacks, and made sure whites understood they were not Puerto Ricans. Often, gangs fought against their co-racial rivals in an attempt to define and control turf, leading to disunity and frustration among black and Hispanic political leaders.

The main problem with *Mean Streets* is its ambitious scope, especially the long time period considered and the many ethnic groups it attempts to explain through youth culture. It is difficult to place this vast group of young people in a quickly changing world, over a long period of time. This is a time of vast change for the American city, and one that can be overwhelming in its complexity. There are too many twists and turns, such that, while Diamond makes an attempt to include them and place the

groups firmly in their historic periods, he is simply overwhelmed. That is not to say this is not a fine book. It is a brave attempt to understand the youth problem over a sixty-year period. In truth, *Mean Streets* could have been three or four books.

The book is meticulously researched. Diamond shows a great deal of control over his sources, and is able to gather an amazing amount of detail out of them. At times, the book can be difficult to read, as the author falls into academic social science jargon; there is a trace of a dissertation here. All in all, Diamond has produced a book that will prove central to understanding Chicago, urban culture, and the role that youth gangs have played in their development.

#### Notes

[1]. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); and David R. Roediger and James R. Barrett, "The Irish and the Americanization of the New Immigrants in the Streets and the Churches of the Urban United States, 1900-1930," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 24, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 3-33.

[2]. Dominic A. Pacyga, "Chicago's 1919 Race Riot: Ethnicity, Class, and Urban Violence," in *The Making of Urban America*, ed. Raymond Mohl, 2nd ed. (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 187-210.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Dominic Pacyga. Review of Diamond, Andrew J., *Mean Streets: Chicago Youths and the Everyday Struggle for Empowerment in the Multiracial City, 1908-1969*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32973>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.