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Redefining Community in Early Twentieth-Century St.  
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- 1 Elizabeth Ann Duclos-Orsello, *Modern Bonds. Redefining Community in Early Twentieth-Century St. Paul*.
- 2 Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018. Pp. 240. ISBN-13: 978-1625343352
- 3 Andreas Hübner
- 4 The field of urban history has experienced an unprecedented growth in past years. Driven by the rise of urban populations on the one hand and accounts of urban decay on the other hand, scholars have begun to explore the transformation of city life and urban development in various historic periods. In American studies, cities such as Detroit, a textbook example of urban decay, New York, a model global and migrant city, and New Orleans, a city that exposes long-lasting racial inequalities in U.S. history, have received much attention. In terms of methodology, many studies still privilege typological and thematic approaches, while others have introduced ideas and concepts connected to the linguistic, cultural, spatial and transnational turns. More generally, practitioners of urban history seem to share a common understanding of the significance of the early twentieth century in the study of cities: at the time, processes of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization were rapidly changing the shape of urban spaces in America.
- 5 In *Modern Bonds*, Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello, a publicly-engaged interdisciplinary scholar of social justice, follows the path of recent works in urban studies which address questions of urban identity and identification: She examines the making of “community” in turn-of-the-century St. Paul, MN. By focusing on an “ordinary” Midwestern city and its residents in the roaring 1900s, 1910s and 1920s, Duclos-Orsello seeks to understand how Americans and the people of St. Paul imagined community, and how cultural production and consumption shifted notions of community in the

country and the city. In pursuing these central questions, Duclos-Orsello uncovers the cultural practices through which the residents of St. Paul displayed their agency and through which communal bonds were renegotiated in daily life. Methodologically, she combines traditional historical sources with social and cultural history methods and consults a wide range of source materials that include literary writings, photographic records, city buildings and parks as well as public festivals.

- 6 In the early 1900s, St. Paul was a booming city that had quadrupled its population in the past two decades. Attracted by strong industrial, finance and commerce sectors, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and Scandinavia poured into the city, as did southern blacks. The numbers of non-English speakers, non-whites, and non-protestants increased immensely, creating anxieties among the white Anglo-Saxon protestant middle class of the “Saintly City.” Even more so, the growth of national and international markets raised concerns over the future in modernizing America. In St. Paul, traditional middle-class communities seemed to disappear and, at once, eulogies for community began to emerge in public discourse. Taking these eulogies for community as a starting point, Duclos-Orsello assesses modern bonds of fellowship in urban America. To Duclos-Orsello, community constitutes a concept in flux – and an “experience or process [that] allows twenty-first-century scholars to attend to the ways in which a wide range of historical actors have constructed, reorganized, reimagined, and negotiated it” (7).
- 7 *Modern Bonds* offers five chapters, each examining an instance of renegotiation over the meaning and practice of community in early twentieth-century St. Paul. To begin with, Duclos-Orsello traces the understandings of community in Sinclair Lewis’s novel *Main Street*. Therein, Lewis explicitly discusses the multifaceted complexities of communal experience, and, as Duclos-Orsello argues convincingly, Lewis shows that, by 1900, the “ability to imagine oneself as a member of a place-based community was limited” (51). In *Main Street*, place and community are not to be equated anymore, albeit, in daily life, many St. Paulites “may have wished for something resembling city-as-community” (52). Duclos-Orsello then focuses on family, social reform and newspaper photography. Again, she argues that the photographic record allows for a glimpse into the redefinition of community in St. Paul, and she diffuses ideas of communal bonds based on city limits. In contrast, Duclos-Orsello emphasizes links of class, race, and gender among residents and conceptualizes community as derived from “affinity and status” (87).
- 8 Hereafter, Duclos-Orsello shifts her attention to knowledge structures of architecture and urban planning and considers the erection of ecclesiastical, residential and municipal buildings as well as the establishment of city parks, playgrounds, and green spaces in the context of communal bonds. In early-twentieth-century St. Paul, public policies and private endeavors of urban design and urban construction still promoted the concept of “city-as-community,” yet, as Duclos-Orsello asserts, “it was becoming apparent that access to an imagined community of St. Paul was more readily available to those with power in the city – economic, political or otherwise” (138). In turn, many residents of St. Paul only sought place-based community bonds with St. Paulites “with whom they shared similar life experiences” (180). Unsurprisingly then, public festivals, such as the winter carnivals of 1916 and 1917, revealed the deep economic, social, and political factions in the city, as much as the festivals revealed racism and discrimination. The organizers of the winter carnivals, for instance, had shown no

interest in attracting African American residents and they had allowed for racism to weave its way into the festivities: during the winter carnival of 1917, “auto dealers rode into town and toured the city while wearing the white robes of the Ku Klux Klan” (161).

- 9 It is a considerable accomplishment of *Modern Bonds* that the book discusses how African American citizens (and other minorities) reacted to such threats and provocations. Only days after the winter carnivals of 1916 and 1917, the black population of St. Paul organized and carried out their own winter fêtes, drawing African American residents and non-residents to the city and, in the process, renegotiating the meaning of community: whereas the “city-as-community” clearly did not embrace them, African Americans enforced their own “understanding of affinity-based community based on race” (164). In this, Duclos-Orsello uncovers that Americans did not lose their sense of community in the 1900s, but that, in the wake of modernity, they renegotiated, redefined, and reorganized communal bonds based on shared experiences and practices of race, class, ethnicity, and religion. These demographic variables were significant “factors in determining a person’s understanding of his or her membership in a given community” (171).
- 10 To conclude, one can only wish that *Modern Bonds* becomes a standard reference in the study of urban communal spaces. The book combines excellent historical analysis and narrative mastery. Quite thought-provokingly, Duclos-Orsello challenges traditional approaches to the concept of community and offers a compelling discussion of the history of St. Paul and the American nation in the early twentieth century.