

**Susan A. Glenn. *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation.* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1990) 312 pp., \$13.95 paper.**

In this meticulously researched and highly readable work, Susan A. Glenn “examines the experiences of a particular group of Jewish immigrants, European-born daughters who, early in this century, went to work in the American garment industry.” The author is attempting here no less than to make sense of the intersecting linkages between eastern European Jewish culture, the immigration experience, working class life, the labor movement, and gender identity.

Given such complexity, the success of *Daughters* is all the more remarkable. One major strength is its firm grounding in the historic evolution of the late 19th-, early 20th-century Russian-Polish *shtetls*; notably, the rising tensions between traditional Jewish female role socialization and the liberating “modernism” of cultural-political movements like the Jewish Bund. Here lay the origins of what would become this generation’s profound desire for self-improvement and social justice. Transplanted to sweatshops in New York and Chicago, these young women continued—within the matrix of a recreated Jewish culture—to seek their authentic voices, self-esteem, and sense of personhood. If the five or fifteen dollars earned over the course of a grueling week’s work meant family survival, there were deep-seated emotional and intellectual expectations to be satisfied also.

Glenn’s imaginative conception of the expansive role of the sweatshops as “a home away from home,” educator, formulator of identity, and initiator into American life, is a second strength. By making the workplace central to the personal, cultural and political identity of this generation of women, the author creates a firm axis around which their lives and perspectives can be better understood. A detailed analysis of the dynamics of the garment industry and how shops and factories organized production and labor markets reveals the economic structures so critical to these women. Glenn uses a wealth of pithy anecdotes, reminiscences, etc., to personalize the day-to-day travails and joys of their world. In a harshly-disciplined, male dominated hierarchy, the immigrant women adopted a host of survival strategies and constantly stretched the limits of autonomy.

Of course, the ultimate expression of such resistance was the extraordinary support they accorded the labor movement. Their sacrifices and solidarity powered the series of strikes between 1909 and 1920 that led to the unionization of the garment industry. In explaining such commitment, Glenn avoids simple reductionism, rather emphasizing a conjunction of reinforcing elements: the impetus provided by a vital Jewish socialist subculture, the intense individual desire for personal dignity and betterment, and disillusionment with conditions and opportunities in the new country. Ultimately, she persuasively argues that the remarkable militancy of these immigrant women must be understood in terms of both their broader ethnic community culture—its solidarities, traditions and tensions—and the compelling aspirations and attractions of modernism.

One leaves this study appropriately in awe of the extraordinary spirit and achievements of this female cohort. A transitional generation, confronted by terribly difficult dilemmas of identity, culture and economic survival, they used a mixture of personal, ethnic-community and workplace resources to establish a foothold in the New World.

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**Cheryl Lynn Greenberg. *“Or Does it Explode?” Black Harlem in the Great Depression.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 317 pp., \$35.00 cloth.**

*Or Does it Explode?* is a meticulously researched study of the social, economic, and political status of Harlem from the 1920s to the 1940s, with a major emphasis on the Depression years.

The book is divided into eight chapters dealing with conditions in Harlem before, during, and after the Depression. In addition, chapters are devoted to work during the Depression, various community organizations, sources of relief, and the “Don’t buy where you can’t work” campaign.

The major focus of this study is archival and institutional data, much of which are statistical. In addition, anecdotes from novels, newspaper articles, speeches, agency files, and legal documents add richness. Greenberg’s discussion of the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943 are especially powerful.

While Harlem was a product of racial segregation, the author goes to great lengths to inform her readers about the wide diversity that existed in the community. She shows the effects of class, gender, nationality, ideology, politics, and religion in shaping the nature of Harlem life, and how various groups—ministers, communists, Republicans, Black Nationalists and more—sometimes joined together and sometimes conflicted in their approaches to the problems facing Harlemites: “Not always in opposition, these groups alternatively merged and split in a complex reflection of race, class, and gender dynamics in the shadow of poverty and powerlessness.”

We also learn of the complex relations between Harlem residents and the institutions of the larger society—labor unions, charitable organizations, religious groups, the media, and various levels of government.

While Harlem suffered greatly during the Depression years, the author argues that the community experienced positive outcomes as a result of the tumultuous 1930s. These were partly due to the social mobilization that occurred during the period and partly as a result of the social and economic effects of the New Deal: “As a result of the Depression, Black professionals served their communities with greater commitment than before, children remained in school longer, Blacks received better medical care, and government aid was easier to obtain.”

Of special value is the book’s relevance to current debates regarding topics such as black nationalism, welfare, class differences in the African American