

While the commercial core—the department stores, restaurants, hotels, and streets—is the backdrop for Remus’s story, it is the women with disposable income and leisure time who are the singular focus. Their ability to transform the geography of downtown Chicago had ramifications for “wannabe” cities across the Midwest. Chicago’s story is their story.

## Producing Class in Chicago

**Black, Joel E. *Structuring Poverty in the Windy City: Autonomy, Virtue, and Isolation in Post-Fire Chicago*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. 272 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7006-2801-8.**

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Joel E. Black contends that the Chicago Relief and Aid Society responded to the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 by expressing a series of random assertions about the city’s vagrant and homeless poor. He argues that over the course of the next fifty years, reformers, social scientists, and judges formalized these assumptions in public studies and court hearings in an effort to justify their authority as interpreters of urban life. When combined, these justifications instituted a new order of governance whose “compulsions” toward the poor “were cemented in shared interpretations of autonomy, virtue, and isolation” that persisted well into the twentieth century (3).

Black organizes his analysis into three sections with clear intent. He wishes to describe “the process of calcification, from social claim to legal decree” (4). Each section shows how the hostile attitudes expressed toward vagrants, working women, and African Americans were “asserted, resisted, and ultimately ratified by formal authorities” (10). Black maintains that the codification of these views provides critical insight for understanding why public officials “have accepted—and continue to accept—conceptions of poverty that overlook structures to stress individual failings” (6). Like many historians before him, Black maintains that poverty did not result primarily from individual failings and misfortunes. It resulted from “structures, or overriding patterns, of authority that are beyond the individual’s control” (3).

In the first section of the narrative, Black accounts for the ways in which local judges adopted the ideas of journalists and reformers and transformed into law the “compulsion” that white men be autonomous. Specifically, the narrative describes how judges interpreted contract law in ways that criminalized joblessness and homelessness. These actions met resistance from critics who believed that labor in the industrial age had become degraded. But the efforts to criminalize joblessness and vagrancy ultimately prevailed, thereby validating Black’s claim that “work in America has historically been used to enslave, confine, and degrade men and women of modest means” (11).

The second section describes how during the Progressive Era in Chicago, vice commissioners and local judges endorsed the “compulsion” that white women be virtuous. The analysis focuses on ways that public officials manufactured a legal justification for virtue that criminalized sex work and prized the domestic duties associated with the conduct of “properly married” white women. When workingwomen objected to efforts to restrict their right to labor, reformers, vigilantes, and courts intensified efforts to intervene in the lives of women and coerce “proper” behavior. These efforts shared a universal feature: they all failed to account for the poverty that actually caused the misfortunes that public officials wished to eliminate.

In the final section, Black examines the “compulsion” to isolate racial minorities that led judges to sanction discriminatory laws and social policies that segregated Chicago’s black migrants into neighborhoods of concentrated and extreme poverty. He argues that at the beginning of the twentieth century, public officials, social scientists, and journalists incorrectly assumed that the migrants’ problems resulted from a lack of industrial preparation prior to settling in Chicago. The catastrophic effect of this assumption became apparent after the race riot of 1919, when African Americans were characterized as strikebreakers “who were to blame for the problems they encountered.” These accounts justified the right to discriminate and in doing so allowed for the segregation that isolated black Americans from social and economic opportunity.

*Structuring Poverty in the Windy City* ambitiously challenges the idea at the heart of the contract theory of labor that poverty results from individual choices rather than structural problems inherent to the social and economic order. Readers may be sympathetic, but they should recognize that support for this argument in this case is often problematic. Black makes factual errors. For example, he misreads a source and claims that the Great Chicago Fire destroyed “roughly one hundred thousand private homes” (20). The statement is problematic because at the time fewer than 60,000 families resided in the entire city of Chicago. In another instance, he mischaracterizes the work conducted by the House of the Good Shepherd by describing it as “a private Catholic charity that sheltered sex workers” (66). More significantly, he distorts the views of Carroll D. Wright, who supervised the U.S. government’s investigation of the Pullman Strike in 1894: Black claims that Wright reiterated the views of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society when he declared the actions of Pullman strikers “not justified.” Wright most likely did not make the statement. It was an editorialized assessment by a reporter of what Wright said in a speech delivered in New Haven, Connecticut. The account was first reported in the *New York Herald*, then appeared later in the *Chicago Tribune*, a notoriously anti-labor newspaper. In any case, Wright’s interpretation of the strike was more complex and critical of George Pullman: he did not simply reiterate the views of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society.