

BOOK REVIEWS

**Halpin, Dennis Patrick. *A Brotherhood of Liberty: Black Reconstruction and Its Legacies in Baltimore, 1865–1920*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 248 pp. \$39.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780812251708.**

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In *A Brotherhood of Liberty: Black Reconstruction and Its Legacies in Baltimore, 1865–1920*, Dennis P. Halpin draws attention to a forgotten generation of Baltimore civil rights activists whose work served as the forerunner of well-known national movements. With his local focus and aim of highlighting the victories of African Americans, Halpin augments literature on the Progressive Era with intriguing case studies that illuminate the mechanics of the Black freedom struggle.

Maryland stood in an unusual position after the Civil War: a former slave state, it escaped federal oversight because it had remained in the Union. Statewide, Black-led grassroots efforts secured gains during Reconstruction instead. These gains were accompanied by a growing disillusionment about the possibilities of electoral politics that were fully realized in Maryland in 1875 when the Democratic Gorman-Rasin machine rode to power on a wave of terror, fraud, and voter suppression. A subsequent generation refused automatic loyalty to the Republican Party and instead joined the likes of Virginia's Readjusters and Florida's Independence Party in organizing for third-party candidates committed to racial equality. Halpin argues that the end of the century was no era of accommodation; Marylanders began to test the power of lawsuits and protest that built upon radical political organizing. Key victories included electing a new slate of judges to Maryland's Supreme Bench and defeating the ban on admitting Black attorneys to the Baltimore bar.

Both proved crucial for the country's first civil rights organizations, the Mutual United Brotherhood of Liberty. The Brotherhood—open to all genders—was founded in 1885 by Black clergymen. Its members combined protests, lawsuits, and publicity into coordinated campaigns based on the premise that achieving equality required a multifaceted approach to defeat the hydra of white supremacy. The book's best chapter spotlights three of these campaigns. After it sought to change Maryland's bastardly law and challenge Baltimore's segregated education system, the Brotherhood defended the African American workers of the Baltimore-based Navassa Phosphate Company who killed white supervisors on the Caribbean Island after being subjected to conditions tantamount to enslavement. After trials in Baltimore, the Brotherhood appealed to the

Supreme Court on the question of U.S. jurisdiction on Navassa, making it the first time Black attorneys argued before the justices. Ultimately, the court ruled against the defense and the president commuted the death sentences of several laborers to life imprisonment. The Navassa episode is a highlight of the book. It is compellingly told and expands what constitutes “local” civil rights organizing.

Moreover, Halpin does an excellent job of contextualizing the Brotherhood’s victories even when the outcomes of its campaigns were partial or narrow. Thanks to its coordination, what lawyers could not win in a court of law the Brotherhood achieved in the court of public opinion. The organization rewrote the popular narrative around the bastardy law, education, and Navassa cases. National organizations took note. Though short-lived, it inspired more well-known and nationally scaled efforts such as the Niagara Movement, the Afro-American League, and the NAACP.

Despite its success, the Brotherhood could not counter white supremacists who linked African Americans with disorder, corruption, and criminality. White Marylanders deployed the period’s language of “good government” to refine and grow the carceral state developing across the country since the end of the Civil War. Halpin adds granularity to a well-established literature by both teasing out and spatializing the networks of officials who became well-known for doling out longer sentences and higher fines to African Americans. These Marylanders gained enough power and widespread support to publicly declare that they timed arrests and sentencing to disenfranchise Black men during elections season.

Once whites equated Blackness with corruption and crime, the challenge for civil rights activists became holding on to the gains made since Reconstruction. The book’s final two chapters focus on attempts to defeat statewide disenfranchisement legislation and the country’s first residential segregation ordinance in Baltimore. The former provides a refreshing revision to the common account that attributes the defeat of disenfranchisement to Baltimore’s European immigrant population who feared they, too, would be affected. Halpin reveals this narrative’s origins in the Republican Party and anti-disenfranchisement Baltimore Reform League, which raised the specter of poor white and European immigrant men being cast into what they described as the lowly social position occupied by African Americans. Marylanders defeated three separate disenfranchisement bills. Likewise, they had to combat four different versions of Baltimore’s residential segregation ordinance, which designated city blocks white or Black and empowered the police to arrest buyers or renters who crossed the color line. Halpin moves seamlessly between the courtroom and street to document the full range of responses to the ordinance while retaining the sharp legal analysis he presents throughout the book.

*A Brotherhood of Liberty* is a consistently engaging and deeply researched book, but its framework sometimes proves limiting. Perhaps because of Halpin’s intent to foreground Black accomplishment, the book lacks an analysis of how class shaped activists’ motives and strategies. For example, that at least two Black activists were Jim Crow-era landlords rates a passing mention, but the significance goes unexplored. Since Halpin relies heavily on the Black press, breaking down the class politics of different publications in the vein of Davarian Baldwin’s *Chicago’s New Negroes* would have also lent more depth to their usage. The lack of attention to the co-construction of class and forms of activism raises questions that cut to the heart of the book: How did class interests foreclose on or configure tactics across generations? How might a class analysis have accounted for why the politics of respectability so often appears? More analysis on the last point in particular would have helped to explain how Baltimore’s civil rights

activism was shaped by Progressive Era networks of bourgeois reform clubs and professional interests.

Nevertheless, *A Brotherhood of Liberty* is a must-read for anyone interested in Baltimore and will prove engrossing for all scholars of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Whether interested in politics or cities, social or legal history, the book holds something for everyone.

**Hemphill, Katie M. *Bawdy City: Commercial Sex and Regulation in Baltimore, 1790–1915*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Xv + 342 pp. \$59.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-108-48901-0.**

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It may not seem, at first glance, that a history of brothel prostitution in a single city could reveal much about the emergence of the American market economy, the many mechanisms of U.S. state-sanctioned policing, the transformation of property law during the era of emancipation, and the ways that discourses of gender shaped and were shaped by all three. However, Katie Hemphill's excellent new study does all that and more. Her book, *Bawdy City*, teaches as much about the nineteenth-century United States as a combination of many other books could hope to do.

Hemphill utilizes the different tools of social, legal, and cultural history to chronicle the rise and fall of brothel prostitution in Baltimore. Beginning her narrative in the Early Republic, she shows how commercial sex grew out of the dislocations and unequal division of resources of early capitalism, and how, by the 1840s, the city's municipal officials had come to tolerate commercial sex so long as it was sold inside, off the streets. Hemphill labels the municipality's treatment of brothel keepers and prostitutes "a tacit system of regulation, designed to contain prostitution and minimize its harm to the public as much as possible" (8). The rise of brothels, and the stamp of legitimacy that the city's courts gave them, helped embed sex work in Baltimore's growing economy. Sex workers from madams to the many women who worked in their establishments forged commercial relationships with "property investors, dealers in goods, insurance agents, bankers, lawyers, publishers, and liquor dealers" (78). Money generated from brothel prostitution, in short, helped make a lot of men wealthy even as it elevated certain madams to the middle class and helped many more prostitutes escape poverty.

Such a system of toleration did not survive the Civil War era intact. The legal precedent for the city's regulatory power over the sex trade stemmed from the 1857 *Hamilton v. Whitridge* decision by the Maryland Court of Appeals, which redefined brothel prostitution as a threat to neighbors' property rights. It was only after the war, however, that Baltimore's authorities began to deploy these new powers in earnest.