



4-1991

Review of Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial-Workers of the World, by S. Salerno

David J. Goldberg
Cleveland State University, d.goldberg@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist_facpub

 Part of the [History Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Publisher's Statement

© 1991 by University of Chicago Press. Available on publisher's site at <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2163439>.

Original Citation

David J. Goldberg, "Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial-Workers of the World, by S. Salerno," *American Historical Review* 96 no. 2 (1991): 627-627.

Repository Citation

Goldberg, David J., "Review of Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial-Workers of the World, by S. Salerno" (1991). *History Faculty Publications*. 19.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist_facpub/19

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

minefield to achieve fiscal stability and a reputation for reliability. Black insurance companies (and banks) evolved out of antebellum mutual aid associations. The Atlanta Mutual Insurance Association, founded in 1905 by Alonzo Herndon, was typical of other pioneering firms, selling small industrial or accident policies at a nickel or a dime per week, the only "social security" most working folk had.

According to an Atlanta black newspaper, "when the people buy a policy in Atlanta Life they are buying Alonzo Herndon" (p. 43). Scrupulously honest but knowing little about insurance, he early tapped the black colleges in Atlanta for capable employees. Capital came from Herndon's prosperous barber shops, which served an exclusive white clientele. Atlanta Life expanded primarily by absorbing weaker firms and reinsuring their policyholders. To its founder, this was a racial obligation: all black businesses would suffer if the public lost confidence in their reliability. At the same time, Herndon and his son and successor, Norris, pursued a very conservative fiscal policy that limited earnings in flush times but enabled the company to weather the depression in good health. Although Atlanta Life's capitalization had grown to \$20 million by 1962, the bulk of its policies were still sickness and industrial. Other black firms, entering group insurance and pursuing white customers, overtook the company in assets and policies. When Norris died in 1977, unmarried and childless, ownership of Atlanta Life passed to a charitable foundation.

Alexa Benson Henderson narrates as much detail about Atlanta Life as anyone is likely to want. Her main theme—that Alonzo Herndon saw his mission as more than providing trustworthy insurance, as upholding the dignity of all black enterprise—is fully argued. Yet she needs to probe Bookerite philosophy more deeply. How much did racial nationalism in business really benefit the masses? Prudent fiscal policies led to investment in municipal bonds, not other black businesses and mortgages, but this was supposed to be the payoff for loyal black patronage. In later years, when white companies more actively pursued black policyholders, Atlanta Life maintained its emphasis on small industrial policies, which resulted in higher premium costs. Henderson ends by saying that Atlanta Life is still "very mindful of the heritage and obligations of a race enterprise" (pp. 205–6), providing jobs, services, and leadership to the community. Whether black capitalism can meet many of the needs of contemporary black America, however, is open to question.

THEODORE KORNWEIBEL, JR.
San Diego State University

SALVATORE SALERNO. *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World*. (SUNY Series in American Labor History.) Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989. Pp. xii, 220. Cloth \$34.50, paper \$10.95.

Salvatore Salerno has written a thought-provoking book that describes the various cultural and intellectual forces that influenced the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) during its formative years. Challenging historians such as Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph Conlin, who he believes have taken an overly institutional and formalistic approach to the Wobblies, Salerno argues that prior to 1915 the IWW should not be viewed primarily as a labor union but rather as a countermovement that sought to create an oppositional workers' culture based on an amalgam of anarchist, syndicalist, and revolutionary beliefs.

Salerno argues that no single ideological label adequately describes the Wobblies. His major goal is to describe the variety of foreign and indigenous influences on the IWW. Challenging "the myth of frontier origins," he demonstrates that anarchists, many of whom came from immigrant backgrounds, played a leading role at the IWW's founding convention and that veterans of Chicago's eight-hour movement of the 1880s, various worker intellectuals, and radical activists such as Daniel DeLeon, Thomas J. Hagerty, and William E. Trautmann helped to shape the Wobblies' revolutionary pluralism. Of all the foreign influences, the role played by the French Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) stands out. Although Salerno denies that the Wobblies adopted any foreign model *in toto* and demonstrates why the French syndicalists' strategy of boring from within the established unions could not be applied in the United States, he maintains that the Wobblies learned much from the CGT and that, in particular, such well-known Wobbly symbols as the wooden shoe and "sab cat" were borrowed from the French. Fortunately, the book is profusely illustrated with Wobbly cartoons that serve to buttress Salerno's contention that the Wobbly sensibility can best be understood through its songs, poetry, and artwork rather than through convention proceedings and formal statements of doctrine.

Since this is primarily a work of intellectual history, Salerno makes little effort to assess the impact of the IWW on the American worker. Because the book concentrates on the pre-World War I period, Salerno does not offer an explanation for why by 1916 the Wobblies rejected many of their original beliefs. Moreover, by deemphasizing the IWW's significance as a labor union, Salerno ignores the extent to which many of its founders consciously sought to create an alternative to the American Federation of Labor. Salerno also might have given greater acknowledgement to Patrick Renshaw, a historian who was sensitive to the various international currents, and especially to Joyce Kornbluh, whose magnificent collection of Wobbly documents sensitized historians to the cultural significance of the IWW. Nevertheless, this is a fresh and original work that adds to our knowledge of the diversity of influences that shaped the American Left in the early twentieth century.

DAVID J. GOLDBERG
Cleveland State University