
NEW TITLES

History

THE PROMISED LAND: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America. By Nicholas Lemann. Knopf. 320 pp. \$24.95

After World War II, more than five million southern blacks, mostly farmers, moved to northern cities. Suddenly race relations ceased to be a "regional matter" and started affecting everything from joblessness in big cities to the successes of the New Right in politics.

Lemann, a contributing editor of the *Atlantic*, has a novelist's gift for folding this epic history into the stories of a few black families. During the 1940s, these families moved to Chicago from the small Mississippi Delta community of Clarksdale (birthplace of the late bluesman Muddy Waters). Displaced by mechanical cotton pickers, they streamed north in search of a better way of life. Yet big-city ghetto society reproduced the social ills of sharecropper society—widespread illiteracy, terrible schools, large numbers of unwed mothers and broken homes—and stirred in some new ones as well, notably high crime rates. Lemann shows how "panic peddlers" and machine politicians fostered residential segregation and overcrowding in order to stabilize their ethnically balkanized city. Like other northern cities, Chicago built mammoth housing projects to deal with the influx. Lemann calls Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes "among the worst places to live in the world," and living in such places "a fate that no American should have to suffer."

Miraculously, many black migrants and their children did manage—in project vernacular—to "clear," that is, to climb out of the ghetto and into the middle class.

How African-Americans divided into two economic strata is one of the ironies of the civil-rights movement. The War on Poverty emerged from the embittered rivalry between Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Johnson's overreaching ambition was to do something on a grand scale. So he bypassed job programs for community action and community development. Lemann argues that this was a blunder because "it presumed a link between political empowerment and individual economic advancement that doesn't exist." The fatal flaw in the community-development ap-

proach was its assumption that ghettos could be converted into middle-class neighborhoods. In fact, most residents left the ghetto as soon as they were economically able. The inner-city blacks who staffed the various Office of Economic Opportunity or Housing and Urban Development programs used their paychecks to move up and out.

But "the idea that the government can't accomplish anything [in ghettos]," Lemann says, is "a smokescreen" obscuring the very real advances that were made by Head Start and other programs. Additional government programs—education, birth control, job training—could change the worst aspects of ghetto culture, but they would be expensive: anywhere from \$10 to \$25 billion a year. Lemann points out that these figures are still less than one-thirtieth of the federal budget and far less than the cost of the savings and loan bailout. Furthermore, such programs would ultimately save money currently spent on welfare and incarceration. Lacking now, he argues, is "a strong sense of national community," "a capability for national action," aimed at healing the problem of the ghetto.

Lemann, however, is not fatalistic. Race relations in America are the history of things once thought impossible—from emancipation to the ending of legal segregation. Even the story told in *Promised Land* would have once been unthinkable: "That black America could become predominately middle class, non-Southern, and nonagrarian would have seemed inconceivable until a bare two generations ago."

MAKING SEX: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud. By Thomas Laqueur. Harvard. 313 pp. \$27.95

The announcement that there happen to be two sexes is hardly going to astound anyone. Yet, according to Laqueur, an historian at Berkeley, until the 18th century, science postulated that there was in effect only one biological sex. Laqueur's contention—and that of a new school of historians who are bringing "sex" into history—is that our notion of what male and female are is culturally imposed. Sociobiologists, who assume that physiology is constant, evidently have had it wrong—and