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## NEW TITLES

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### 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

easy. But if "anatomy" varies from culture to culture and period to period, then the study of sex—adding history to sociology and biology—becomes so complicated that even a scholar like Laqueur has trouble sorting out all the strands.

Through most of Western history, Laqueur believes, anatomists were either establishing or responding to a philosophical debate over man's dominant position in society. The one-sex model, first popularized by the Greek anatomist Galen and later refined by Aristotle, posited that the female sexual organ was merely an interior version of the male's. "The one-sex model," Laqueur argues, "displayed what was already massively evident in culture more generally: *man* is the measure of all things."

Until the Renaissance, anatomists followed the lead of their classical forebears in interpreting genital structures. Then, in 1559, matters became problematic when Renaldus Columbus "discovered" the clitoris. The significance of this discovery, Laqueur says, was that "the relationship between men and women was not inherently one of equality or inequality but rather of difference that required interpretation."

For the next three centuries, a great controversy about conception, orgasm, and passion was waged in order to preserve the one-sex model. Anatomists resorted to dubbing the clitoris a "female penis." Even after scientists gave in to the two-sex model, there was little doubt about which sex was "first." In 1865, for example, the urologist William Acton wondered whether "the majority of women are not much troubled by sexual feeling of any kind." Sigmund Freud transferred the female orgasm from the clitoris to the vagina, and, not surprisingly, was left with the question, "What does woman want?"

Laqueur's history of sexuality seems slightly too uniform to be entirely convincing. There is evidence that people long before the 18th century were aware—how could they not be?—of men and women as separate beings; even pas-



sages in Aristotle suggest this. What Laqueur fails to acknowledge is how differences between the sexes were formerly expressed in metaphysical and even cosmological terms, which were as persuasive then as biological and scientific facts are now. The real nature of the revolution in the 18th-century thinking was that biology and medicine began supplying evidence for what had been previously understood on a spiritual level.

**THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE BRITISH ARISTOCRACY.** *By David Cannadine.* Yale. 832 pp. \$35

Last Christmas, British newspapers were running an acid little story about Mrs. Thatcher's final "honors list." Mrs. Thatcher wanted to use aristocratic honor to reward new-made wealth and loyal party service. So she proposed to make the media tycoon Rupert Murdoch a knight and pot-boiling novelist Jeffrey Archer a lord. But she had to withdraw their names after the committee that scrutinizes the lists on behalf of the Queen objected. This minor fracas nicely illustrates the fact that aristocratic title still maintains a complex symbolic presence—a spectral afterlife of prestige without power—in British political life. Behind such contradictions lies the century-long social transformation that British historian David Cannadine traces in this exhaustively researched book.

One hundred years ago, the landowning classes were Olympians: stupendously wealthy, immensely privileged, the arbiters of taste and politics alike. Their decline began in a distant and unlikely place, the American Midwest. There, farming began to be practiced on such a large scale that the English landlords could not compete. In England agricultural prices fell, as did the landlords' rents from property. In the century from 1880 to 1980, they were gradually forced to sell off much of their landholdings. Today there are still around 2,000 landed estates, but a century ago they covered half the land in Britain and now they cover only a quarter. The reduction of the great aristocrats' estates—such as the Duke of Devonshire's from 133,000 acres to 40,000 acres—is of less significance, though, than the disappearance of almost the entire class of lesser landlords. Of the