The Racketeer’s Progress

The Racketeer’s Progress explores the contested and contingent origins of the modern American economy by examining the violent resistance to its development. Historians often portray Chicago as an unregulated industrial metropolis, composed of factories and immigrant laborers. In fact, the city was home to thousands of craftsmen – carpenters, teamsters, barbers, butchers, etc. – who formed unions and associations that governed commerce through pickets, assaults, and bombings. Working together, these groups forcefully challenged the power of national corporations and physically managed the development of mass culture in the city.

Scholars often ignore this defiance, painting modernization as consensual and craftsmen as reactionary, corrupt, and criminal. Prompted by cinematic stereotypes and business rhetoric, many authors conflate organized crime and organized labor. This is ironic, for the tradesmen’s reputation derives not only from their brutality, but also from their successful fight against modernization, the emergence of a consumer economy, and gangsters like Al Capone.

The struggle between tradesmen, corporations, and reformers redirected American law. Progressive-era courts rebuked the craftsmen for governing trade. In the 1920s, elite attorneys crusaded against unions and associations, inventing the term “racketeering” to sway criminal juries. But the Great Depression reversed harsh laws. Amidst falling prices and wages, urban craftsmen became a model for New Deal recovery statutes and a focus for constitutional debates in cases like Schechter Poultry v. U.S. (1935). Politicians redefined racketeering, enacting new provisions to protect unions against gunmen, strengthening connections between labor and the Democratic Party, and allowing craftsmen access to the growing power of the state.

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The Racketeer’s Progress
Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy, 1900–1940

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To Randy, in fond memory of M.W.C.
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Common Abbreviations in Text and Notes

Organizations

CFL  Chicago Federation of Labor
ISFL  Illinois State Federation of Labor
BTC  Building Trades' Council of Chicago
IBT  International Brotherhood of Teamsters
CMB  Chicago Masons and Builders’ Association
EA   Employers’ Association of Chicago
BCC  Building Contractor’s Council
BCEA  Building Construction Employers’ Association
CCLA  Citizens’ Committee to Enforce the Landis Award
IMA  Illinois Manufacturers’ Association
NAM  National Association of Manufacturers
NMTA  National Metal Trades’ Association
AABA  American Anti-Boycott Association

Courts

Sup.C.C.  Superior Court of Cook County
Circ.C.C.  Circuit Court of Cook County
Crim.C.C.  Criminal Court of Cook County
USCA  United States Court of Appeals
USDC, ND, E. IL United States District Court, Northern District, Eastern Illinois

Archives

NARA-GL  National Archives and Research Administration, Great Lakes Division

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xviii  Common Abbreviations in Text and Notes

CHS  Chicago Historical Society

Government Documents


Newspapers

CDN  Chicago Daily News

CDT  Chicago Daily Tribune

CRH  Chicago Record-Herald

NYT  New York Times

WP  Washington Post