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Robert D. Johnston. *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 416 pp. $37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-09668-1.

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Robert D. Johnston is well aware that the title of his book will strike many historians as an oxymoron. Leftist scholars in particular have not looked kindly upon the political aspirations of the middle class, which have been viewed as a bulwark to capitalism since Marx's time. Johnston, however, finds the main fault line in American politics running through what is broadly imagined to be the middle class. Usually, when scholars talk about this group, they are referring to a body of well-to-do professionals or junior executives. But Johnson argues that such business executives, doctors and–dare I say it–college professors are far more deeply invested in the capitalist system than the lower middle class, the so-called "petite bourgeoisie." Shop owners or small scale manufacturers, "because of their tenuous economic condition, low levels of property ownership, and limited aspirations cannot be considered capitalists" (p. 15). The "middling class" was at best ambivalent about capitalism's future and promise. Their relations with the working class were more intimate, and they readily found common cause with their employees and skilled workers when strikes or political questions disrupted the social order. *The Radical Middle Class* credits the lower middle class with providing the leadership and grassroots support for a variety of reform and even radical measures that animated politics in Portland, Oregon during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Members of the petite bourgeoisie still harbored notions of a "republican political economy" that can be traced back to the nation's founding. Historians of social movements of the late-nineteenth century have taken to labeling these economic ideas as "producerism," and identifying them with the Anti-Federalists, the "hard money" men of the Jacksonian era, the Knights of Labor and the Populists. Johnston has added small business owners to the ranks of farmers, skilled workers and others who believed that wealth should be broadly distributed and earned through work. They were not socialists, but neither did they wholeheartedly embrace a capitalist order of absolute property rights and a rough and tumble rush for profits. Johnston insists the lower middle class has kept the faith in economic justice even into our current day as a legacy of this moral economy of old.

Delving into the mindset of a class of citizens later to be designated the "silent majority" presents its challenges. Johnston relies heavily on biography to reveal the values and perspectives of what he prefers to call "the middling classes." The careers of four Portland reformers come under special scrutiny. Mayor Harry Lane attacked rapacious public utilities. Later, as a U.S. Senator, his pacifist principles and suspicions of the munitions industry induced him to vote against U.S. entry into World War I. Mayor Will Daly stood up to the streetcar monopoly and came out in favor of Henry George's "single tax" plan to tap the unearned profits of wealthy landowners. William R. U'Ren was the father of the initiative and referendum; he was also a devotee of the short ballot, the single tax, proportional representation, and a graduated inheritance tax to pay for a program of public works projects for the unemployed. Lora Little led a series of campaigns to block compulsory vaccination for smallpox as well as forced sterilization in the name of a democratic polity; she characterized the immunization effort as a scam to enrich the medical profession. (Lane was a doctor and U'Ren a lawyer whose annual income ran to about $1,800–which would perhaps make them honorary members of the lower middle class.)

Unhappily, none of Johnston's subjects left behind manuscript collections, leaving him to piece together their life stories from government documents and newspaper accounts as best he can. The problem is well illustrated when he discusses the case of Curt Muller, a local laundry owner who challenged the state's Eight Hour law for women. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the statute in the landmark case of *Muller vs. Oregon.* Muller, or at least his lawyers, attacked the law on grounds that anticipated the charges of feminist scholars who saw it as hostile to the interests of working women. Alas, we do not know enough about Muller and his relations with his

employees to be sure if he advanced this line of argument out of consideration of his female workforce, or out of a desire to exploit his workers more thoroughly, or if this was ever his opinion in the first place.

Because Oregon adopted the initiative and referendum in 1902, its electorate voted on many radical reform proposals. Johnston draws on a detailed precinct level voting data to locate support for the single tax, women's suffrage, anti-vaccination and other political causes. He finds these ideas generated greater support in the eastern portion of the city, a fairly homogenous region occupied by the middling classes. Here, Johnston attempts to make his case by relying on various maps that crudely measure support for various radical or reform propositions. Although he had data from hundreds of precincts, Johnston regrettably eschewed offering even the most elementary statistical analysis; demonstrating at least a correlation between support for these diverse measures would allow him to show these were part of a congruent worldview. Glancing from map to map, I was not always able to see an alleged pattern; others who have examined the data failed to see a reform minded middle class. (Johnston maintains that more sophisticated electoral analysis might fall victim to the much dreaded ecological fallacy, overlooking the fact that the ecological fallacy applies equally well to his analysis of maps.)

Intellectuals come under heavy fire throughout the work. The author accuses them of spewing "a conscious, antidemocratic dogma" that reveals their elitist proclivities, even if they professed sympathy for liberal or radical causes. The work frequently departs from Portland to critique or chastise the likes of Antonio Gramsci, Seymour Martin Lipset, C. Wright Mills and Richard Hofstadter, who are responsible for a portrait of a middle class that is "politically retrograde, morally inert, and economically marginal" (p. 3). The breadth and depth of Johnston's reading in the scholarly literature make this work a true *tour de force* for a first book. His attention to social theory was surely one reason *The Radical Middle Class* won the Sharlin Award from the Social Science History Association. I do think it a bit extreme to say that scholars have "demonized" the American middle class. The sins laid at their doorstep in this country seem relatively benign; Europe, of course, is another matter. I would have liked to see Johnston make reference to the works of John D. Buenker and J. Joseph Huthmacher, who credit progressivism with solid support among urban, working class types.

Johnston also harbors a more favorable opinion of the handiwork of Portland's reformers than many recent scholars. Middling citizens were able to make commission government work for them rather than for the elite that dominated under the city council system. The initiative and referendum were designed to curb corporate control and allowed radicals to at least put their ideas before the public. He even argues that a school bill that aimed to shut down private schools was less nativist in its appeal than egalitarian, despite its association with the Ku Klux Klan. Racism and nativism rarely come into play in Johnston's narrative, though it may be that the city's overwhelmingly White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant demographic robbed them of much salience on these mostly local issues.

For reasons not fully explained (other than the rise of the Ku Klux Klan), Johnston views the early 1920s as a watershed for small producer radicalism. The egalitarian principles of producerism gave way to a liberal populism "that rhetorically challenged elites while ultimately refusing to confront corporate power and social relations" (p. 227). Yet unlike other scholars of the era's radical movements, Johnston does not despair that all is lost. He concludes with a hopeful assessment of the possibilities for reform from below in the United States. If academics could just to learn to trust "the people," we might expect to see more accomplished to curb corporate power and promote a more egalitarian agenda.

Political history could certainly use many more local studies like this one for Portland. Johnston moves deftly back and forth from the local situation or personality to the broader scholarly issues. He reminds political historians of a wealth of more purely local issues that never show up in scholarly studies with a state or national focus. The single tax and the campaign against vaccination engaged the attention of many Portland residents, even if these issues have escaped the notice of much current scholarship. Most importantly, Johnston challenges historians to reassess their understanding of the middle class and its role in reform. If I am not wholly persuaded by Johnston's analysis, it is perhaps because I believe racism and xenophobia are more deeply rooted in the American psyche than he seems to allow. I suspect that the strong support George Wallace elicited from lower-middle-class Americans with a thinly veiled racist agenda in the late 1960s did more to temper academia's enthusiasm for participatory democracy than the intelligentsia's mostly upper-middle-class upbringing. But certainly Johnston has presented scholars with another template of reform that needs to be taken seriously and applied elsewhere.

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