

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Marilyn P. Watkins. *Rural Democracy: Family Farmers and Politics in Western Washington, 1890-1925*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995. xii + 239 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3073-2.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Ostler (Department of History, University of Oregon)

Published on H-SHGAPE (June, 1997)

Marilyn Watkins has written a tightly constructed and carefully focused history of democracy and community in a rural place—Lewis County, Washington. Her study shows the persistence of a tradition of rural democracy, cooperation, and protest from the late 1880s through the early 1920s. For most of this period, expressions of radical democracy did not lead to deep conflicts among farmers or between farmers and townspeople. This, Watkins argues, is because class divisions among farmers in Lewis County were relatively weak and racial divisions were largely absent, and because most people in the county shared a commitment to “the larger community” that “blunted the radicalism of the agrarian political movements” (p. 12). The relatively harmonious social relations, however, were shattered at the end of World War I. Lewis County’s major claim to historical fame is that it contains Centralia, the site of the November 1919 clash between the American Legion and the Wobblies in which four Legionnaires were killed and one Wobbly, Wesley Everest, was lynched. Watkins attributes the “heightened tensions of the postwar years” to the “increasingly hard-line position of conservatives” rather than to “an increase in radicalism in the countryside” (p. 164).

In developing this account of Lewis County’s democratic radicalism, Watkins stresses the “continuing role that rural culture played in the spawning and nurture of political protest” (p. 9). Crucial to our understanding of this rural culture and the political protest that arose from it, she argues, is gender. Historians of agrarian protest, Watkins points out, have badly neglected “women’s activism and the challenge to prevailing notions of gender in agrarian movements” (p. 9). Throughout *Rural Democracy* Watkins develops a nuanced and textured discussion of the gendered division of labor on Lewis County farms and of the importance of women’s participation in community organizations that included both farmers and townspeople, and in strictly agrarian organizations like the Farmers’ Alliance and the Grange.

The introduction (Chapter One) lays out the major

themes of the book: the continuity of agrarian democracy, the community basis for this political culture, the implications of a community ethos for cross-class cooperation, and the importance of women in creating and sustaining this political culture. In so doing, Watkins offers a defense of local history. She argues that most studies of agrarian activism have “focused on one movement and the actions of a specific group of leaders, stressing the distinctions between that movement and what came before or after.” In contrast, a study of several successive movements in one locale enables us to see “the common links” among otherwise disconnected episodes (p. 9). Watkins also argues that an intensive local study can reveal how the “networks and the commitment to the larger community that many people felt ... blunted the radicalism of the agrarian political movements” (p. 12). Moreover, since women’s activity in organizations like the Farmers’ Alliance and Grange was more visible at the local than the state or national level, a local focus is necessary for revealing the contribution of women to these organizations.

Chapter Two, “Rural Community Life: Lewis County in the 1890s,” outlines the geography, early settlement, social organizations, economy, and demography of Lewis County. Watkins also discusses prevailing attitudes toward Indians, Chinese immigrants, and African-Americans. Watkins finds that settlers occasionally expressed racist attitudes, but more often than not, she argues, settlers tolerated and even showed respect for non-whites, especially if they “acted in ways acceptable to their white neighbors” (p. 42). Overall, during this period, Watkins finds that the many voluntary organizations Lewis County residents established helped them “overcome many of their divisions.” In general, people had an “ethic” that “valued unity and commitment to the community” (p. 46).

Chapter Three, “New Visions: Political Culture in the Farmers’ Alliance,” discusses the rise of the Farmers’ Alliance in the 1890s. According to Watkins, Lewis County

farmers did not become Populists because of severe economic hardship. Most Alliance leaders, in fact, owned their land free of debt. Farmers who joined the Alliance, however, had moved to Lewis County within the previous ten years and consequently had not accumulated “much cushion against a series of bad years” (p. 54). They were motivated by fear of the future: that they would go into debt and perhaps lose their land if things continued as they were. Watkins provides a rich discussion of the interior life of the Alliance, emphasizing especially the contributions of women to the movement’s vitality. She also stresses that because the movement used “cultural forms” that were accepted by almost everyone in Lewis County, members of the Alliance were able “to live for the most part peacefully with their Republican neighbors” (p. 65).

In Chapter Four, “Populists and Republicans: National Parties and Local Issues,” Watkins turns her attention to the Populist Party. She provides a brief overview of the party nationally and then notes that the party’s most important local concern was the high level of county debt and the high salaries paid to county officials. Watkins discusses Republican Party responses to Populism, the issue of fusion between Populists and Democrats, and the rise of the American Protective Association. She also provides an analysis of electoral support for Populism, noting that Populism was strongest in outlying areas. From this observation, Watkins concludes that “[t]he degree of commitment to agriculture, rather than economic circumstances *per se*” was the strongest factor explaining Populist support (pp. 78-79). Watkins concludes this chapter by stressing the importance of local issues and notes that many of these “cut across party lines” (p. 83). Conflicts that were expressed at the national level, then, were muted by a community consensus at the local level. Understanding the local context, once again, is shown to be crucial for analyzing social movements.

Chapter Five takes the story into the early twentieth century. In this chapter, “Progressive Populists: The Grange in Lewis County,” Watkins’s main focus is on the Grange. The Grange had long been active in the county but was overshadowed by the Alliance and the Populist Party. In the early 1900s, however, the Grange grew rapidly and “allowed the practice of democratic participation, and the pursuit of economic justice to continue to flourish ...” (p. 123). Watkins offers a very finely researched account of the social and political history of the Grange, emphasizing, as with the Alliance, the role of women in the organization. Watkins notes that the Washington State Grange was far more liberal than the

national organization on most issues, including women’s suffrage. The Grange was non-partisan but did allow farmers to articulate a range of views about political issues at the local, state, and national levels. The Socialist Party, by contrast, gained some support in Lewis County (as much or more among farmers than timber workers), but this support was limited because, unlike the Alliance, “Socialists did not have the social organization among the English-speaking population to connect its political program directly to the rural community and mobilize the electorate” (p. 117).

Chapter Six, “Specialization and Cooperation: Agricultural Change in the Early Twentieth Century,” focuses on farmers’ attempts to develop larger-scale cooperatives in a time when specialization in agriculture was increasing. Dairy and poultry cooperatives became the most important of these initiatives. Increasingly, Watkins stresses, farmers tried to improve their economic position through specialization and thought of themselves as businessmen. At the same time, cooperatives like the Lewis-Pacific Dairymen’s Association, which contained an overwhelming percentage of men, adopted a “probably unconscious gender conservatism” that was related to the leadership’s “conservative political posture” (p. 139). In the poultry industry, as well, women had raised chickens for home use, but as production shifted to the market, men became more dominant. In general, then, there was a slight shift away from the ethic of the Grange and the Alliance, an ethic that “mitigated the potential economic power of men over women, although it certainly did not prevent abuses” (p. 151). Chapter Six also discusses the efforts of the Extension Service and the Farm Bureau to gain adherents in Lewis County. Watkins points out that farmers were “highly selective in what they were willing to take from the Extension Service and county agents” (p. 149).

In “A Community in Conflict: The End of Tolerance,” Chapter Seven, Watkins turns to a new phase of Lewis County’s history when the “political fluidity” that had characterized the county’s earlier history “came to an abrupt end” during and after World War I (p. 153). As noted earlier, Watkins attributes the conflict of this period more to the growing conservatism of conservatives than to any increase in the radicalism of radicals. Although Watkins notes that the IWW was somewhat active among Lewis County timber workers, the largest number of radicals came from farmers who supported the Grange and the Nonpartisan League. In 1919 and 1920, Watkins notes, Lewis County Grangers were “going out of their way to take sides in a highly charged atmosphere. They were declaring their solidarity with

laborers in Seattle and other faraway cities....” (p. 177). Although there continued to be strong support for radicalism among Lewis County farmers in the early 1920s, local Grange membership began to decline as the state Grange was weakened by factionalism. One Washingtonian, William Bouck, was kicked out of the national Grange for being too radical and founded the Western Progressive Farmers. This organization, however, never gained much support in Lewis County. In the aftermath of this period of conflict, Watkins notes, “many people sought to bind together the community again” (p. 186) by emphasizing issues like good roads that could gain broad support.

In her conclusion, Watkins reiterates her major themes and turns, finally, to a discussion of why the “Populist spirit may have died more quickly in some parts of the country” than in southwestern Washington. The answer, she suggests, may have been because women in the South and Midwest were “not fully welcomed, thus limiting the development of community solidarity” (p. 194).

As I’ve indicated in my summary, *Rural Democracy* is a very finely researched study. If local studies needs a good defense right now, this book offers one, as its close reading of a local situation shows the value of contextualizing a series of radical movements in their community milieu. In so doing, Watkins makes a persuasive case for the durability of radicalism.

I’m less convinced, however, about Watkins’ claim that Lewis County is at least somewhat exceptional in having a continuous tradition of radicalism. In her suggestion that the lack of women’s involvement in the Alliance and the Populist Party accounts for the fact the “Populist spirit” died out more quickly in some parts of the country than in Lewis County, Watkins makes two questionable assumptions.

The first assumption is that women were less involved in the Alliance and the People’s Party elsewhere. Watkins notes that Scott McNall’s work on Kansas Populism argues that women were marginal members of the Alliance.[1] “If this is true,” Watkins suggests, “then this could be a major missing element in the structural weakness he claimed undermined the Populist movement in

that state” (p. 195). There are two problems here. First, McNall is probably wrong, and Watkins has good reason to suspect as much, since she has earlier cited MaryJo Wagner’s dissertation, which establishes a very similar picture of the role of women in the Alliance and Populism in Kansas to Watkins’s own.[2] Moreover, if women were relatively marginal to Kansas agrarian radicalism, the logical conclusion might well be that women’s marginality *strengthened* Populism rather than weakened it, since Populism did better in Kansas than almost anyplace else in the country. Of course, the point is that women made a significant contribution to the Alliance and Populism everywhere.

A second assumption that Watkins makes is that agrarian radicalism did not often endure. The strength of the Socialist Party in Kansas, the Nonpartisan League’s origins in North Dakota, the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota, just to mention a few, however, all suggest strong continuities with earlier populist movements. Even in the South, as Elizabeth Sanders’ forthcoming work will argue, agrarian radicalism may have persisted more than we might think.[3] What Watkins has done is less to show an exceptional case of continuity as to provide a rich and valuable account of one part of a larger, continuous radical tradition.

Notes:

[1]. Scott G. McNall, *The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[2]. MaryJo Wagner, “Farms, Families, and Reform: Women in the Farmers’ Alliance and Populist Party,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1986. Michael Goldberg’s *An Army of Women: Gender and Politics in Gilded Age Kansas*, forthcoming from Johns Hopkins University Press, will further add to the literature on gender and politics in the Midwest.

[3]. Elizabeth Sanders, *Farmers, Workers, and the State*, forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Jeffrey Ostler. Review of Watkins, Marilyn P., *Rural Democracy: Family Farmers and Politics in Western Washington, 1890-1925*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. June, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1045>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.