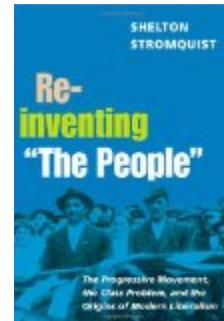


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Shelton Stromquist. *Reinventing 'The People': The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. x + 289 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03026-0; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07269-7.

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In the Matter of Class

Despite the insistence of some that the past should be understood on its own terms, in truth, the study of history is always, in some measure, deeply engaged with the present. Thus it is the attempt to comprehend the place of class in American politics during the twentieth century and, most assuredly, the present which animates Shelton Stromquist's *Reinventing 'The People': The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism*. Grounded in a welcome and able synthesis of the disparate elements that comprised the Progressive movement, Stromquist's larger concern rests with the latter parts of his subtitle: "class" and "modern liberalism." To engage these critical historical issues, Stromquist employs a framework that addresses the persistent question of whether progressive economic change, in the context of the differential power accorded capital and labor, is best achieved through conflict or conciliation.

Stromquist quickly dispatches the historiographic debates that have swirled around whether it is possible, given the array of reformers, issues, and viewpoints at work during the first decade-and-a-half of the twentieth century, to identify a coherent Progressive movement. With a focus on ideology and rhetoric, he argues that the various aspects of Progressivism arose in reaction to the intense conflicts between capital and labor during the 1890s and coalesced in their quest for a "classless social harmony" that embraced a unity of labor and capital interests (p. 7). Like all syntheses, no single narrative unfolds; rather, the reader encounters a series of episodic vignettes of people, events, and organizations

whose shared ideology celebrated the possibilities of social harmony. Stromquist pays particular attention to the prominent part female reformers played in advancing an agenda dedicated to class harmony while simultaneously claiming greater public space for themselves. And, while Progressive reformers ceded, in limited areas, an expanded role for the state to realize their vision, they in no way challenged the sanctity of private capital. Further, Stromquist maintains that this reluctance to confront class helped to shape, and thus narrow, subsequent reform efforts throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.

Stromquist's progressives "imagined 'the people' as a civic community in which class would lose its meaning," and, thereby, developed a notion of citizenship "drained of nineteenth-century producerist class partisanship" (p. viii). While not fully elaborated, particularly those aspects of producerism that also depended on a harmony of interests between employers and employees, Stromquist finds within producerism greater possibilities for forming a class-based social movement that might directly confront and alter power relations. This older politics and its willingness to address disparate economic power did not entirely disappear during the Progressive Era. In fact, in this telling it culminates in the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations where dissension existed between reformers who advocated a mass labor politics to address maldistributions of wealth and power, and those who proposed a series of polite recommendations predicated upon a harmony of interests between labor and capital.

This latter ideal successfully rallied Progressives around a politics that sought to temper divisive tendencies.

Importantly for the Progressives, and for Stromquist, the success of this social amelioration, which demanded an end to partisan corruption and the pursuit of “democratic renewal,” like many instances of universalist rhetoric, had distinct racial boundaries that deemed immigrants and African Americans inadequately prepared for the responsibilities of full citizenship. So, despite their assertion of a universal harmony of interests, Progressives employed a definition of citizenship that “entailed assimilation to ‘whiteness’ and effectively circumscribed ‘the people’” (p. 132). As Stromquist makes clear, a reliance on universalist language in the midst of calls for exclusion represented only one of the many contradictions inherent in Progressive ideology itself.

Indeed, the author’s larger claim rests on yet another contradiction: that the unwillingness of Progressive reformers to overtly engage “the structures of class power and domination” undermined their own desire to create a community free of class antagonisms (p. viii). Despite their best efforts, a competing strand of class-based politics persisted against which Progressives continually positioned themselves and which, ultimately, “challenged the defining feature of the Progressive movement—its promise of social harmony through democratic renewal” (p. 193). Consequently, in the midst of this compelling discussion about the primacy of a quest for social harmony among Progressive reformers, conflict emerges as the theme of the book. Progressivism is born of the struggle between labor and capital and, further, contains its own inherent paradoxes.

However, in the end, the politics of conflict do not prevail and certainly one motive of the book is to understand the origins of later reform devoid of deeper class analysis. Stromquist concludes that twentieth-century reform movements, specifically the New Deal and the Great Society, depended upon this Progressive Era notion of class harmony and effectively used the state to contain

the possibility of greater class conflict. Thus, by the close of the twentieth century, social activists had, in many ways, “fulfilled the destiny that Progressive reformers had defined for them”; and though the class problem was not entirely resolved, “it had at least been redefined in ways that made it seem antiquated and irrelevant by the century’s end” (pp. 202-203). Stromquist’s own challenge is his desire to retain class conflict as the force that drives the events of the Progressive era, while simultaneously acknowledging that, at least ideologically and with important political ramifications, a desire for and the rhetoric of class harmony triumphed—a tension that, in many ways, remains unresolved in the book.

Perhaps part of the solution resides in a deeper consideration of why the idea of social harmony remains so appealing and has exhibited such persistence. To attribute the Progressives’ ultimate victory to a stronger organizational base than those who advocated a class-based approach or to the support of those in power does not seem wholly sufficient. A long and venerable tradition, with origins in classical liberalism and expression in capitalist ideology, assumes that all citizens share economic interests which will, in turn, lead to civic harmony. Hence, many believe that all enjoy the same fundamental relation to the market and that under conditions of fair play all have a potentially equal chance for success. The idea of a unity of interests, between labor and capital and between politics and economics, has been, historically, exceedingly powerful in America.

In this provocative book Stromquist grapples with the vexing problem of how class politics operates within the context of a prevailing ideology that subsumes economic divisions under the panoply of social and economic harmony. Nevertheless, while he acknowledges the influence of Progressive ideals, he finds in the persistence of producerist values a sense that the success of a politics that denied the centrality of class was not a foregone conclusion at the turn of the twentieth century, a belief that seemingly prompts his own reluctance to cede permanent victory to social harmony.

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