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Mark A. Lause. *Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005. 243 pp. $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07230-7.

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The Radical Roots of the Republican Party

Young America opens in 1854 in Ripon, Wisconsin, at a meeting of residents protesting the recent decision by Congress to open the territory of Kansas to slavery. According to the early historiography on the Republican Party, Mark Lause notes, this modest occasion marked the birth of the Republican Party. Historians of the Republican Party have not recognized, however, that the community of Ripon had its origins in a socialist experiment and that Alvan Earl Bovay, the presiding officer of the meeting, was the ex-secretary of the National Reform Association (NRA), which Karl Marx and Frederick Engels recognized in their famous *Manifesto* (1848). Republicans today might blanch, but Mark Lause argues that if historians are to understand the emergence of the Republican Party and the coming of the Civil War, we need to take this radical organization seriously.

The arc of Lause's narrative stretches from the working-class political organizations of New York City in the 1820s through Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Homestead Act in 1862. The demand for land reform ties all this together, as it was a central demand of radical workers who organized in the aftermath of the Panic of 1819, and it became a key tenet in the Republican ideology of "free soil, free labor and free men." The NRA was the organization that sustained land reform as an issue in American political life and, while Lause is careful to note the consistently low numbers of NRA membership, he argues that the organization played an outsized role in making land reform a national issue that was ultimately absorbed by the Republican Party. The book is organized into three parts that explore the origins and spread of the NRA; the "Agrarian Persuasion," or the ideology of the movement; and the impact of the NRA in national politics.

Founded by George Henry Evans and a small group of workers in New York City in 1844, the NRA developed into a political movement that extended throughout the northern states, with a marginal presence in the South. While the core of the NRA were always urban worker-activists, the movement also gained adherents from the followers of the French socialist thinker Charles Fourier, and movements with compatible goals such as the anti-renters in upstate New York, the Dorrites of Rhode Island, and political abolitionists in New York and Massachusetts. These collaborations served the cause of land reform rather than the NRA itself, which Lause argues was part of the genius of the organizers. Almost inexorably, land reform became an increasingly salient issue over the antebellum decades, even while the NRA organization remained small.

The "Agrarian Persuasion" of the National Reformers was a coherent ideology rooted in the socioeconomic realities of the antebellum United States, but also in touch with the socialist movements that flourished simultaneously in Europe. Lause does not examine the social and economic history of the working-class experience (for that one still needs to read Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic*, 1984), but instead offers a clear portrayal of the ideology of National Reform that emerges from the "movement sources" that inform his account (p. 2). Principal among these is *Young America*, the official newspaper of the NRA edited by George Henry Evans, and the source of Lause's title. The National Reformers emphasized land reform not for the alleviation of the poverty of individuals, but as the means to transform society. Land reform would "diffuse wealth and democratize power" with revolutionary consequences that National Reformers hoped would be far deeper than Republican Party leaders would ever imagine (p. 61).

Lause also emphasizes the antislavery position of National Reform. As secular thinkers the National Reformers distrusted the evangelical leanings of so many abolitionists, but their ideology pushed them to identify with the antagonists of chattel slavery. Tensions between the abolitionists and National Reform were further exacerbated by the tendency of labor activists to decry "wage

slavery" and the penchant of some abolitionists to idealize "free labor." Lause makes the interesting argument that "wage slavery" was in fact a statement of solidarity with African American slaves and that the working-class critique of economic injustice should not be read as racially exclusive. After all, the institution of slavery militated against the National Reformers' goal of a society in which both wealth and power were democratized. On this point, Lause challenges another influential historiography that portrays white workers' movements as fundamentally racist. Lause argues that these historians are overly selective in presenting the evidence and that more NRA documents decried racism than fostered it. Further bolstering his claim are the highly complimentary comments on the National Reformers from the black abolitionists William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass (p. 83). Lause might also have noted that prominent abolitionists such as Wendell Phillips were very supportive of the rights of workers.

While never a decisive force in party politics, Lause documents the NRA's consistent efforts to shape public opinion with its newspapers, to influence elections, to gain pledges for its platform from mainstream candidates, and to petition state governments. Yet by 1849 the NRA had practically ceased to exist as a national organization and Evans was forced to stop the presses of *Young America* (p. 96). Although the organization had collapsed, the platform of land reform had been fully absorbed by the new Free Soil Party, just as land reform would be embraced by the Republican Party in 1854. The 1850s would see almost six hundred of the nation's two thousand newspapers endorse the land reform agenda of the NRA, now expressed as a homestead bill (p. 3).

Is it too much to argue that a direct line can be drawn from the NRA to the Homestead Act? It would be hard to argue that Republicans shared the social critique of the National Reformers as Lause has described it. No policies were implemented to obstruct the "land monopoly" that stood in the way of the social revolution the National Reformers desired. Indeed, speculation in land and monopolization by highly capitalized interests, such as the railroads, continued to be a feature of the U.S. economy as it expanded into the West. And the experience of the average Western farmer–not to mention yet another generation of Native Americans–was difficult at best, short and violent at its worst.

That said, *Young America* is a valuable study of an important antebellum political movement. Historians of working-class politics, radical history, and antebellum politics will want to read it.

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