

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Peter Argersinger.** *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism: Western Populism and American Politics.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995. x + 302 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0702-0.

**Marion K. Barthelme, Inc. NetLibrary.** *Women in the Texas populist movement: letters to the Southern mercury.* College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 1997. xii + 248 pp. ISBN 978-0-585-17515-7; ISBN 978-0-89096-742-3.

**Marion K. Barthelme.** *Women in the Texas Populist Movement: Letters to the "Southern Mercury".* College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1997. xii + 248 pp.

**Jeffrey Ostler.** *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993. xii + 256 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0606-1.

**Catherine McNicol Stock.** *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. xi + 219 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3294-1.

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Catherine McNicol Stock asks a fundamentally important question at the start of her excellent book: how could the Virginia frontiersmen who joined Bacon's Rebellion "have been both fundamentally egalitarian and genocidally racist?" (p. 6). This question has puzzled me as a teacher and scholar for several years now. In my own work on Minnesota farmer-laborism in the 1880s and 1890s, I encountered a farmer named William Webb. An abolitionist, Webb joined the Union army in 1861 to free the slaves, but returned to Minnesota in 1862 to defend his homestead during the Dakota conflict from the very people that lived on his land some fifteen years earlier. After his service as a union soldier and Indian killer, Webb went on to become a steadfast Populist, a true radical. How does one explain William Webb? I believe the four books under consideration here help us to do this.

Though all of these books address important aspects of rural radicalism, they do so in very different ways. Together, they paint a complex portrait of rural America, one that might offer ways to understand as complex a figure as the obscure William Webb. Ultimately, the challenge of understanding rural radicalism is definitional. How can we define the topic broadly enough to include an undeniable tradition of movements for democracy and social justice, while at the same time making room for an equally long tradition of racial and political violence? But just as important, how can we be sure that our definition

of rural radicals, be they of the right or the left or a little bit of both, is indeed rural and not simply part of an American tradition of radicalism?

Catherine McNicol Stock helps us to begin to think about these issues in systematic ways. She notes correctly that most Americans today "have only the remotest connections with the day to day realities of rural America and most frequently idealize its values..." (p. 3). To help us better understand her topic, she develops a very useful categorization of radicalism into producer and vigilante traditions. The first tradition includes movements for social justice while the second concerns the darker side of American behavior. She makes the case that what defines movements as rural are five contexts which she argues are found together only in the countryside and in that context reflect, reinforce, and transform one another over time: "These are: frontier life, class, race, gender, and evangelism" (p. 7).

From this beginning, Stock traces the history of producer and vigilante movements in rural America starting in the colonial era and bringing us right up to the Oklahoma City bombing and the far right movements of today. I can highly recommend this book for use in undergraduate classes as the summary of the history of these traditions is impressive for its readability and thoroughness. The strength of the book is that she finds the inter-

pretive room for producer radicals who also exhibit vigilantism. Such people as Nathaniel Bacon, Tom Watson, Vicky and Randy Weaver all held producerist notions and tended to the vigilante as well. Where I quarrel with her analysis is that her arguments could work almost as well for urban America which shares both traditions with the rural world.

As Stock makes clear herself, the farther back you go in U.S. history the more rural the nation was. Indeed, while both the producer and vigilante traditions have strong roots in rural America, one can make the case that these were quickly grafted on to the nation's urban centers. The merging of producer/republican radicalism with vigilante justice can be seen in Gary Nash's work on the urban crucible of the American Revolution, in the New York City Draft Riots during the Civil War, and in the long tradition of racial and gang violence in American cities. A quick glance at recent reports of hate crimes from the Southern Poverty Law Center *Intelligence Report* reveals many examples of vigilante violence in urban areas, with the skinhead movement being particularly strong in cities. It would be hard to link current urban vigilante violence to a producer tradition because as artisan culture declined in the nineteenth century so too did producer radicalism in the city. Still, a populist class based critique of bigness and corporate capitalism often informs urban vigilante radicalism. Moreover, urban violence against minority groups today is often handled by police, as recent examples in New York City, Los Angeles, and other major cities support thus lessening the need for a vigilante approach in many metropolitan areas. McNicol Stock's important analysis of radicalism's janus face, I believe, works better for understanding an American tradition than it does for a rural tradition.

My own thoughts on the characteristics that separate rural from urban radicals is the unique relationship of rural people to the land, the market, and the state. Briefly, compared to urban people, rural dwellers are more closely tied to extractive economies where land and labor are mixed concretely and directly (often in the form of family labor under the direction of the father). Here, regarding the relationship between land and labor, the concept of social reproduction, or the assembling by families and communities of cultural, economic, and biological resources to recreate for one's children their parents world, is useful. Threats to the goal of social reproduction are often the catalyst for rural radicalism (or urban radicalism for that matter). The biggest threats (or perceived threats) to rural people in this regard have been the market and the state.

The engine of the rural economy tends to be farming, though logging and mining are also important. Relatively isolated from wholesale markets, rural people often pay a premium for goods they buy and trade at a disadvantage when selling their products. Stock discusses the importance of bigness as a source of rural radicalism and here she is right on. Rural markets even today function differently than in metropolitan areas, with face to face exchange still an operative issue. The farther back you go the greater the difference. Rural radicalism was often sparked by attempts to reform the market in the interests of those who mixed their labor directly with the land. Often, the state was seen as the primary culprit in generating the unfair conditions at the market place and creating an economic environment favorable for bigness and urban America. Moreover, the significance of the state to property, water, and mineral rights creates unique political issues for the rural world. And before the our own continental empire had been completed and secured, say by the turn of the twentieth century, the role of the state in taking over the burden of Indian killing from vigilante pioneers is particularly important. Given the relationship of the state to issues of land, labor and the market in the minds of rural folk, the tendency for producer and vigilante movements to go political makes perfect sense.

Marion Bartheleme's excellent introduction and collection of letters from women in the Texas Populist movement does not discuss the vigilante tradition of Populism, but does help us to see that the producer tradition of rural radicalism included women. Bartheleme focuses primarily on women's experiences and thoughts during the Alliance period of the movement. This is a much needed addition to the published literature on Populism and would work very well in undergraduate classes where a book on the agrarian revolt of the 1880s and 1890s might be assigned.

The introduction weaves a quick and current summary of the history of the Farmers' Alliance into its story on women in the movement. The strength of the book emerges from the understanding that women not only shaped the direction of the agrarian revolt but were also empowered by the movement. In the pages of the *Southern Mercury*, women debated their roles as producers in terms of practical agriculture and their importance as consumers in terms of economizing on the farm. They discussed very specific issues regarding politics, ranging from issues of patronage to banking regulation. They produced learned letters on party platforms and corruption in government. And, of course, they concluded that the time had come for the people to unite and liberate

the government from those who threatened the republic. But as Barthelme points out, in the end, women tended to emphasize the “the human aspects of poverty among all cases and its effects upon the family and home. They never doubted that impersonal industrial capitalism caused family poverty and the poverty of single women” (p. 42).

Though Alliance women concerned themselves with the issues of banking and party politics, they also spent considerable time debating the question of female suffrage. Not surprisingly, Alliance women who wrote to the *Mercury* tended to support suffrage, but not overwhelmingly. “Between April 19, 1888 and April 18, 1889,” we learn, “fifteen percent of the women’s letters focused on female suffrage or women’s rights. Of the Texas letters, 56 percent were in favor of suffrage and 44 percent were against it.” But as Barthelme points out, the very act of writing about suffrage in a public forum may have represented “the first articulation of feminist consciousness for many rural women” (pp. 47-8).

I have covered only a small part of what is an excellent introduction, because the letters are the heart of the book. Published between 1884 and 1907, the *Southern Mercury* became the official Texas state Alliance journal in 1886. All together, there are 180 letters arranged chronologically, with 158 of them published between April 1888 and December 1889. The last letters included in the collection are from 1895. Barthelme has included clues as to what each letter addresses. Topics range from “Female modesty,” to an “Example of humor,” to a letter by Mrs. M. E. Ussery on the “Alliance with labor; moral training of children; woman as helpmate; curse of Eve.” Taken as a whole, the letters are a rich source for scholars and students of the rural radicals in the United States. They feature the role of women in reproducing the family farm and in sustaining the politics of Populism.

Jeffrey Ostler’s, *Prairie Populism* also discusses the importance of women to the farm economy and to Populism, but his focus is less on the Alliance period of the movement and more on the creation of the Populist Party. As with Barthelme, Ostler’s focus is on the producer tradition of Populism and his primary concern is to explain what led to the creation of a strong Populist vote in Kansas and Nebraska and such a weak one in Iowa. Ostler demolishes the standard explanation that Kansas and Nebraska went Populist because of hard times, while in Iowa, and other “eastern” states, more prosperous circumstances led to the rejection of third party activity. Using very convincing evidence, he compares eastern Kansas and Nebraska to Iowa in terms of

political, economic, and environmental conditions and shows that the “frontier” explanation of Populism has run its course. Instead, he offers an important alternative explanation. “The crucial difference between Iowa and Kansas/Nebraska,” he argues, “was party competition” (p. 10).

While Ostler does not claim that his findings for Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska hold true for the rest of the nation, he does attempt to shift the ground of Populist studies from the social to the political. “State political environments,” he contends, “were crucial in determining whether agrarian radicalism took a third party form” (p. 10). Ostler does not ignore the social dimensions of Populism. Indeed, his book contains useful information on women, political education, and movement building. But his most original contributions concern the development or absence of third party movements. Iowa’s active Farmers’ Alliance achieved important railroad legislation in 1888, without resorting to third party tactics. The success of the Iowa Alliance in gaining Railroad reform by using nonpartisan pressure in a competitive political environment left many leaders within the state movement opposed to third party politics. By contrast, no amount of political pressure by the Kansas or Nebraska Alliances could move those state legislatures, dominated by unchallenged Republican establishments, to reform on any issue, and thus, successful third parties were born.

Ostler has written an excellent book that points to the significance of politics in understanding the overall success or failure of radical movements in the United States. The unique politics in Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska led to very specific kinds of rural radicalism in each state. When considering the failure of Populism in the nation, such a conclusion poses a daunting picture for those tinkering with the idea of third party formation today. Add to this the complexities contained in Peter Argersinger’s *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism*, and one might conclude that the real lesson of the Populist Revolt is to resign oneself to the corruption of Democratic or Republican rule in America.

Argersinger has done us a real service in collecting some of his previously published essays and writing a new historiographical piece on western Populism. The range of Argersinger’s interests and the quality of his scholarship is impressive. This is political history at its best, and the focus of the essays is on politics. My personal favorite concerns the substitution of the gospel of Populism for more mainstream religions in Kansas. When read in comparison with Ostler, Argersinger demonstrates that even had the Populists expe-

rienced greater success at the polls nation wide, there were still considerable stumbling blocks to overcome after electoral victory. His stories of legislative battles in Kansas, of election law reform in the Dakota's and Iowa, and the squelching of the Populist voice in Congress is chilling. When a new party achieves power it can only sustain itself by delivering the political goods. Argersinger shows that the People's Party came to power in western states with a radical agenda, but encountered so many political obstacles to exercising that power that they failed to effect needed reforms. Moreover, they were in fact often the victims of the undemocratic policies introduced by chastened members of the Republican and Democratic Parties who used parliamentary skill and raw political power to defeat Populist bills and pass election laws hostile to third parties.

Argersinger's careful research and analysis of Populist voting records and his extraordinary and clear explanation of election laws and fusion politics are significant and deserve wide readership. For many years now Peter Argersinger has been generating some of the best work on the history of rural radicals and American politics and this book serves as a testament to his skill as an historian.

After considering all four of these excellent books, it seems clear that the tendency of historians writing

on rural radicalism is to explore the best of the producer tradition and leave largely hidden the darker side of things (exceptions exist for most of the work on California agriculture and for such excellent works as Barton Shaw's *The Wool Hat Boys*). My own work on Blue Earth County, Minnesota only makes slight mention that the most famous event to take place there was the hanging of 38 Dakota men in 1863, still the largest mass execution in American history. Young men, mostly farmers like William Webb, defeated the Dakota in a war of genocide and then went on to live many years on stolen land that they later defended in a political war against monopoly. The study of the darker tradition of rural radicalism has been left largely to other fields: western, Native American, African American and Asian American history typically do a better job than do "rural historians" in exploring the complexity of a rural environment that both holds forth the hopeful example of democratic reform and also the tragic reality of America's imperial and violent past. Finding a usable past that works to understand both, along the lines of Catherine Stock, should be moved up on all of our scholarly and teaching agendas.

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