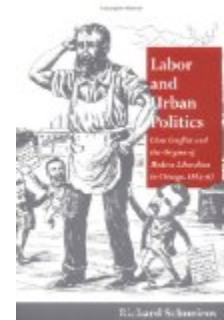


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Schneirov. *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-1897*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. viii + 390 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06676-4; \$52.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02374-3.

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This meticulously researched work analyzes the interaction among four vigorously debated subjects: organized labor, urban politics, class formation and conflict, and the origins and meaning of “modern liberalism.” In the process, the author challenges much of the prevailing wisdom on each of these crucial topics, and posits three revisionist propositions which have the potential to narrow the gap between labor and political history, while enhancing our understanding of the complex character of American reformist ideology.

Chief among these propositions is the assertion that “the more enduring political effect of class formation occurred within the two major parties, and particularly the Democratic party, and in local government” (p. 3). Second is the author’s argument that, in Chicago at least, organized labor and pro-labor policies “attained political credibility, electoral appeal, and legitimacy in respectable discourse” (p. 4) several years before the severe economic depression of 1893-97. Third is Schneirov’s contention that the ideologies of liberalism and republicanism are “not” mutually exclusive and cannot be counterposed” (p. 5).

In formulating his first proposition, the author takes direct issue with those labor historians who insist that organized labor’s political fortunes were inextricably intertwined with those of an independent working-class party, similar to the ones that emerged in most European countries. That conviction has caused many of the same scholars to equate the ultimate failure of all such efforts in the United States—whether Socialist, Populist, United Labor, or the Knights of Labor—as sounding the death knell for labor’s political influence, at least until the New Deal. As a result, labor historians have gener-

ally expended far too much effort trying to explain the causes and consequences of that particular manifestation of “American exceptionalism”, instead of attempting to discover what strategy labor pursued after it had learned its painful lesson in the harsh realities of the two-party and capitalist systems. In the author’s view, Chicago’s labor leaders played both major and independent party politics simultaneously, enabling them to achieve significant influence in the Democratic coalition of businessmen, reformers, ethnic groups, and unions brokered by Carter Harrison I during the 1880’s. When the labor crisis of 1886 destroyed the Knights of Labor, the majority of working-class voters abandoned their faith in an independent labor party, while their leaders recognized the necessity of aligning themselves with sympathetic middle-class reformers, primarily under the aegis of the Democratic party. By the late 1890’s, Schneirov asserts, this new liberal reform coalition regularly outpolled the independent labor vote by better than two to one.

On the level of ideological discourse, Schneirov makes a convincing case for his conclusion that the relationship between “republicanism” and “liberalism” has been evolutionary rather than dialectical. Although acknowledging that the two concepts are “analytically distinct,” and sometimes in tension with one another, he nevertheless insists that they “were commonly mixed in the speech and thought of the same people” (p. 10). Both were based fundamentally on “the liberal principle of the sovereignty of the people in a constitutionally limited state” (p. 9). Although this “constitutional liberalism” developed hand-in-glove with laissez-faire “marketplace liberalism” in the eighteenth century, the rise of big business and a corporate-managed economy threatened to destroy the former in the name of the latter by the late

nineteenth century. As the chief casualties of this transformation, workers were among the first to embrace organization and political action as the surest way to restore constitutional liberalism to its rightful place as the primary organizing principle. The resultant “labor republicanism” infused both the independent labor party movements and the concomitant struggles of workers to gain power and influence within the two-party system. Such an interpretation establishes a fundamental continuity from the labor republicanism of the late nineteenth century through the Progressive Era to the New Deal. It validates those historians “who viewed American Liberalism as potentially idealistic, democratic, pro-labor, and above all, progressive,” and it “widens the angle of vision by also connecting the reconfiguration of liberalism to the rise of trade unions and the broader labor movement and its presence in local politics” (pp. 5-6). It also documents the rise of an important element in what James T. Kloppenberg (*Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.]) calls the “via media” between laissez-faire capitalism and state socialism.

Given the persuasive power of his synthesis, it is unfortunate that the author completely neglects the strongest possible evidence of its explanatory power—the myriad studies documenting the crucial role played by organized labor, and the working-class in general, in the

reform movements of the Progressive Era, especially on the state level. Curiously, he concludes that the “most important impact of the new liberalism came on the national level when the leaders of the Chicago Civic Federation founded the National Civic Federation, with its commitment to the trade agreement and reform of the Sherman Act” (p. 370). In truth, its greatest impact occurred in those urban, industrial states where “urban liberals” and “social reformers” worked closely with organized labor on reform programs designed to aid the working classes. Organized labor combined with a wide variety of women’s organizations to create what Robyn Muncy (*Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991]) has called a “female dominion in reform” and Theda Skocpol (*Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992]) has dubbed the “maternal welfare state.” If Shneirov’s Illinois model for the emergence of “labor republicanism” and “modern liberalism” proves substantially true for several other states, he will have provided a vital missing link in our understanding of the evolution of twentieth century American liberalism.

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