

H-Net Reviews

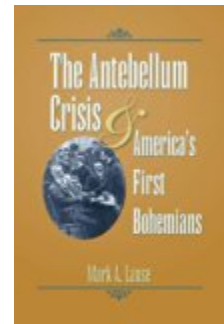
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark A. Lause. *The Antebellum Crisis and America's First Bohemians*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2009. x + 181 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60635-033-1.

Reviewed by Jason Stacy (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville)

Published on H-CivWar (May, 2010)

Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson



Antebellum Bohemians

Mark A. Lause has written a succinct, useful, and engaging book on the advent of American bohemianism and the confluence of social, cultural, and political radicalism that marked this first self-styled bohemian movement. Lause traces New York bohemianism to the return of “The King of Bohemia,” Henry Clapp, from his sojourns in London and Paris where the nascent abolitionist and Fourierist acquired, according to Lause, a “world-weary impatience with easy answers” (p. 18). Disillusioned with the reform strategies of “moral suasion” and the “political naïveté characteristic of many of his old comrades,” Clapp set himself against “unexamined conventional thinking” as the means to general reform. This led Clapp to surround himself with a coterie of broadly like-minded radicals who, while embracing ideologies as diverse as free love, Fourierism, abolitionism, and land reform, self-consciously united under Clapp’s desire for a “cultural transformation of politics” that, ultimately, carried them “far beyond the mere electoral contests between rival cliques of officeholders and office seekers” (p. 43).

With this argument, Lause effectively pushes the twentieth-century mantra that the “personal is the political” back to the mid-nineteenth century and makes “lifestyle” (a term of the twentieth century) into a kind of nineteenth-century activism. Centered on the famous beer vault, Pfaff’s, Clapp and fellow bohemians constructed a kind of “utopia on Broadway” where existed a “republic of the creative” whose “self-chosen populations,” men and women, famous, infamous, and un-

known, “sat where they chose ... and generally regarded each other not merely with tolerance, but a mutually amused respect” (pp. 44, 63). When Clapp began to publish the *New-York Saturday Press* in 1858, bohemia had its own mouthpiece.

According to Lause, “Bohemianism emerged alongside the Republican Party,” and, in the frantic final years before the Civil War, as the second two-party system disintegrated and new coalitions of laborers, land reformers, Free-Soilers, abolitionists, and Socialists looked to the new Republican Party as the means to deep social reform, many bohemians united with so-called Red Republicans, who advocated labor reform through government redress, and supported John C. Frémont’s presidential campaign of 1856 under the banner of “Free Men, Free Soil, Frémont” (p. 86). However, with the repudiation of John Brown by prominent Republicans in 1859, Clapp, who was always skeptical of the ability of systemic reform from within political systems, predicted that Abraham Lincoln’s victory in 1860 would send office seekers “begging, like the abject mendicants they are, for the smallest crumb that falls from the political table” (p. 80). Ultimately, Clapp and his fellow bohemians “doubted the ability of electoral politics to solve the crisis,” and distanced themselves “from the entire process” (p. 84).

Lause also connects Walt Whitman to Clapp’s circle of bohemians; Whitman scholars have likewise found this connection interesting. Amanda Gailey and Christine Stansell have shown that Clapp proved instrumen-

tal in redefining Whitman's public persona into something resembling a bohemian between 1858 and 1860 in the *Saturday Press*. Whitman, in turn, was glad for the publicity and introduction to amenable publishers, like Thayer and Eldridge, who published Whitman's third, and greatly expanded, edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which included the poet's new clusters on amative and adhesive love and featured a new frontispiece that showed Whitman looking more like an inspired aesthete than the confident mechanic of the first two editions. In this regard, Clapp helped remake Whitman's public persona into a kind of bohemian ideal.[1]

Lause's work situates America's nascent counter-culture within the broader contemporary discourses

around reform, utopia, democracy, and aesthetics, and will thereby be useful to cultural and social historians alike. I encourage readers with further interest in the subject to visit Edward Whitley's digital archive, "The Vault at Pfaff's" at <http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/pfaffs/>.

Note

[1]. Amanda Gailey, "Walt Whitman and the King of Bohemia: The Poet in the Saturday Press," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 25 (Spring 2008): 143-166; and Christine Stansell, "Whitman at Pfaff's: Commercial Culture, Literary Life and New York Bohemia at Mid-Century," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 10 (Winter 1993): 107-126.

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Citation: Jason Stacy. Review of Lause, Mark A., *The Antebellum Crisis and America's First Bohemians*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2010.

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