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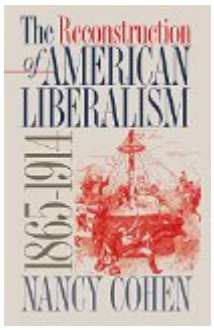
Nancy Cohen. *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xi + 336 pp. $70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2670-6.



Reviewed by Nancy Unger

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Whose Liberalism, Whose Progressivism?

A recent exchange on H-SHGAPE discussed the arbitrariness of the term "Gilded Age" and noted the widespread recognition of that term as a historians' construct.[1] In his brief introduction to a new documentary history of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, John Buenker notes that for at least the last twenty years, "a growing number of historians have argued that the putative dichotomy between the two eras has been greatly exaggerated--that there are compelling reasons to justify conceiving of the period from 1877 through World War I as a single historical era." Buenker notes that the consensus of a number of historians is that "the success of the latter period would not have been possible without the groundwork laid during the former; the relationship between the two eras seems at least as synergistic as antithetical."[2] These are only two examples of historians' widespread rejection of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era as two distinct periods fueled by totally different philosophies. This abundance of evidence makes particularly vexing Nancy Cohen's claims that her otherwise excellent work "offers a new narrative of the origins of modern American liberalism," and that her demonstration "that the distinctive values and programs of modern liberalism were formulated by Gilded Age liberals, not in the very different context of the Progressive Era" is "contrary to most accounts" (p. 4). However, the fact that Cohen's thesis is not as original or contested as she repeatedly asserts should not keep readers away from this well researched, lively, and ultimately provocative and important book.

Cohen's overriding theme may be familiar, but the depth of her research into the development of ideas by intellectuals concerning the proper relationship between capitalism and democracy following the Civil War significantly enhances our understanding of the "genealogy of modern liberalism" (p. 11). In particular, Cohen emphasizes that the influence of liberal intellectuals of the Gilded Age has not only been underestimated, but that their philosophies have been mistakenly perceived as laissez faire liberalism. Cohen offers insightful and detailed assessments of conventionally noted GAPE thinkers ranging from

Edwin Lawrence Godkin and William Graham Sumner to Herbert Croly.[3] However, one of the greatest contributions of this book is her detailed presentation of the evolution in thinking of a number of lesser known intellectuals whom Cohen presents as nonetheless representative and, frequently, influential in their day. Cohen traces the intellectual pilgrimages undertaken by these men. They at one point supported greater democratization in order to improve the lot of workers (or former slaves, or farmers, or any number of other disadvantaged subsets of the population in post-Civil War America). Ultimately, however, they saw great danger in enhancing the power of these various groups that, when combined, constitute a majority of the population.

Cohen, a research scholar at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, argues that this perception of danger led to Progressivism's acceptance and even frequent defense of corporate capitalism, a "settlement ... premised on the conviction that individual satisfaction, the public interest, and national prosperity depended on the preservation of the consolidated capitalist enterprise" (p.255). The administrative politics instituted to facilitate that consolidation eliminated the previous, albeit flawed, forms of Jacksonian democratic participation and accountability. Terming "quite modest" the innovations in social welfare and economic regulation that began in the Progressive Era and extended far beyond, and contending that they were in any event counterbalanced by the expansion of administrative agencies and the constriction of avenues of participation, Cohen concludes, "It seems that we have yet to reckon the price American paid for the eviscerated and anemic democracy bequeathed us by late-nineteenth-century liberals" (p. 256).

Throughout the book, Cohen demonstrates a sophisticated grasp of various economic, social, and political theories, which she conveys clearly without sacrificing complexity. The evolution of thinking on the part of the many intellectuals she portrays is frequently fascinating. Of particular interest to academics are the accounts in chapter 7, "The American Scholar Revisited," concerning issues of academic freedom. Following the Haymarket Riot, Edwin Godkin organized a campaign to have Richard Ely ousted from Johns Hopkins University for suggesting, in his book ***The Labor Movement in America***, that advances in civilization should come from the bottom up. Ely survived that campaign, but lost his prestigious position as secretary of the American Economic Association. After leaving Johns Hopkins and joining the faculty of the University of Wisconsin, Ely endured a public trial by university regents there. He earned his acquittal only by admitting that if he were a socialist, his dismissal would be justified. After being forced out of Cornell, Henry Carter Adams was able to gain a full professorship at the University of Michigan by repudiating his earlier socialist criticism of industrial society, confessing that his support for the Knights of Labor in 1886 was the result of having been duped by the labor movement. Cohen presents these examples of the closing off of ideas and options within the scholarly community as especially significant because the college-educated dominated much of the Progressive thought that was to come.

There has long been a plethora of evidence to suggest that the end result of many progressive reforms, despite the claims to the contrary then and now, was to shore up capitalism rather than seriously challenge it. Progressivism, however characterized, has always been clearly distinct from socialism, and should be judged as such. My struggles with Cohen's claims about the nature of Progressivism stem from her assertion, "I have not intended to violate the now routine stricture against viewing 'progressivism' as a unitary movement or a single ideology" (p. 254). Despite her stated intentions, it seems to me this is exactly what Cohen has done. She notes that there were "truly new currents of thought in the Progressive Era: feminism, cultural modernism, and pragmatism," and asserts, "[t]he differences were impor-

tant and I do not seek to minimize them" (p. 243). Two pages later she acknowledges "that some progressives dissented from the new liberalism's legitimation of corporate capitalism, apotheosis of the consumer, and depoliticization of social life, even if they did tragically share in some of the assumptions" (p. 245). She nevertheless concludes that "when all is said and done," the practical power of even Walter Lippman and Herbert Croly, two of the most successful in translating their ideas into political influence, was "quite limited" in comparison with "the policymaking social scientists ensconced in proliferating government agencies" (p. 245). Her protests to the contrary, virtually the entirety of her book does view progressivism as stemming from a single ideology. While that ideology was a powerful force and Cohen traces its origins and development extraordinarily well, many progressive era scholars would disagree that this constitutes the whole story of the period and its legacy.

It would be unfair to expect Cohen to apply her thesis to every aspect of that vast and complex array of reforms and reformers historians have labeled "progressivism." However, her few pages dedicated to showing how the actions of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson cinch her case do not appear equally applicable to all threads of progressivism. Cohen's thesis can be applied to a variety of aspects of progressivism, resulting in highly debatable degrees of democratic progress or success. Robert and Belle La Follette, for example, were exactly the kind of college-educated progressives Cohen describes as inheriting the diluted message of Gilded Age reform, in their case, at the University of Wisconsin. In 1913, Seaman's Union president Andrew Furuseth stood up in Congress upon the passage of Robert La Follette's Seaman's Bill which ended the virtual enslavement of contract sailors, and cried out, "This finishes the work which Lincoln began," with tears running down his cheeks.[4] Was this really (to keep up the sea theme) just so much rearranging of deck chairs on the sinking ship of progressive efforts to meaningfully transform lives and further democratic ideals? The following year Belle La Follette publicly opposed the segregation policies of the Wilson administration in Washington, D.C., noting, "Continued violations of fundamental principles of human rights touching a race that constitutes one-tenth of our citizenship must ultimately degrade our standards, corrupt our ideals, and destroy our sense of democracy."[5] Her speeches, writings, and actions helped to bring about an end to the new segregation efforts, a victory that was celebrated, among other places, within the offices of the NAACP. Is such a triumph really "anemic"? How well do Cohen's conclusions apply to the impassioned speech (and life's work) of Rose Schneiderman following the Triangle Factory Fire? What about the variety of other "bottom up" reform efforts, or wilderness preservation and resource conservation, or women's suffrage and nascent feminism? Are the relative merits of such achievements really "quite modest?"

The answers to these questions, of course, depend on one's perspective. Reasonable people can, and do, legitimately disagree on these vitally important questions concerning the motives and results of democratic reforms of the past as well as those of the present. Nancy Cohen's study will further invigorate debates about the meanings and values of the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and the goals of reform efforts and reformers claiming to seek a more democratic society today.

Notes

[1]. The discussion appears under the title "Periodizing the Gilded Age," in H-SHGAPE entries 27 April-1 May 2000, and can be accessed at http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~shgape/.

[2]. John Buenker, ed., ***The Gilded Age and Progressive Era, 1877-1920*** (Acton, Mass.: Copley Publishing Group, 2002), pp. 1-2.

[3]. Nowhere in that coverage or even in the bibliography does Cohen make note of Gillis

Harp's *Positivist Republic: Auguste Comte and the Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1920* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). Harp emphasizes not only the transatlantic passage of such ideas (which Cohen also notes), but also their impact on Croly's father, David, as well as other intellectuals of the Gilded Age.

[4]. Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 227.

[5]. Nancy C. Unger, "'When Women Condemn the Whole Race': Belle Case La Follette Attacks the Color Line," in James Danky and Wayne Wiegand, eds., *Women in Print* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming fall, 2003).