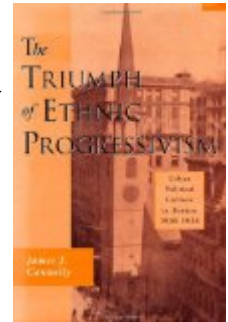


James J. Connolly. *The Triumph of Ethnic Progressivism: Urban Political Culture in Boston, 1900-1925.* Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998. xii + 260 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-90950-2.



Reviewed by Robert W. Cherny

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This is an important book about the nature of ethnic politics in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At one level, Connolly (who is an assistant professor of history at Ball State University) seeks to revise the "new" political historians of the 1960s and 1970s, who developed an ethnocultural interpretation of politics in which ethnicity was a given and political behavior flowed from it--i.e., in which ethnicity was the independent variable and party affiliation was the dependent variable. None of those historians argued that politics might play a significant role in shaping people's understanding of their ethnic identity or the ways in which ethnic identities might take political forms. Recently, some historians have argued for the social construction of ethnicity. If we accept the notion that ethnicity is socially constructed, both from within and outside the group in question, then it is logical to look to the role that politics may play as a part of that process of that social construction. Connolly is not the first to make such an argument, but his treatment of Boston is one of the most persuasive analyses to take that approach. At the same time, Connolly places his analysis

within a framework that emphasizes the importance of political institutions, thus incorporating another important element in the historiography of the past decade or so. Finally, he offers a highly satisfactory way to understand urban progressivism. And he does all this within a chronological narrative that provides useful information about important issues in Boston's politics from 1900 to 1925.

Connolly briefly reviews the highly contested historiographical terrain of progressivism, then concludes that progressivism, as a concept, coheres only "as a style of political behavior, a motif of public action that took on many meanings." The most important themes within progressivism, he continues, were "united public action against corrupt forces" and opposition to political parties (p. 8). Not an ideology but a style of politics, progressivism was available to many different groups and individuals. It was "a public language open to manipulation by those with access to the public sphere" (p. 12), available to women as well as men, to all classes, to all ethnic groups. "The result," he claims, "was a multiplicity of distinct Pro-

gressivisms, sharing a common vocabulary but pursuing diverse ends" (p. 40). He distinguishes sharply between this version of progressivism in an urban context and the concept of "urban liberalism," suggesting that historians who developed the latter concept were, for the most part, trying to differentiate between progressivism and the New Deal and to find in the urban, ethnic politics of the early twentieth century a predecessor for the New Deal that was outside the boundaries of progressivism. Finally, like many other recent historians, he discards the traditional categories of boss and reformer for understanding politics in turn-of-the-century Boston.

The antiparty aspects of progressivism produced important changes in the structure of politics. In the nineteenth century, parties had dominated nearly every aspect of the political process. In the early twentieth century, much of the power of parties was systematically dismantled. Marking this as a centrally important institutional change, Connolly argues that, in the late nineteenth century, parties moderated ethnic conflict and accommodated ethnic differences, providing an arena for coalition-building among various ethnic groups. For nineteenth-century Boston, the two most important groups were the Irish and the old-stock Protestants (Yankees or Brahmins). Other ethnic groups were relatively small, though Connolly does examine the impact of progressivism upon Italians and Jews. The Irish became the numerical majority in Boston around 1900, though, and the Irish are the major focus for Connolly's analysis. Because nineteenth-century parties monopolized access to politics, and because parties were coalitional and accommodationist, Connolly argues, "a defiant assertion of ethnic power never became the centerpiece of the party's appeals" (p. 27). Party leaders, including Irish party leaders, worked instead to mute ethnic conflict in the interest of partisan victory. Thus, "as long as parties remained entrenched in the city's political

process, social conflict was channeled into partisan competition" (p. 36).

As the coalition-building and accommodationist aspects of parties declined in the early twentieth century, interest groups became the means by which individuals participated in politics. "None of the many versions of reform arose from a grassroots movement," Connolly argues. Instead, "each sought to create such a movement, or at least to create the impression of one" (p. 75). In consequence, group identities eclipsed party identity as the "principal category of political mobilization" (p. 76). Interest groups could form around various identities, including class, gender, ethnicity, and neighborhood, though Connolly argues that, in Boston, the progressive discourse mitigated against the emergence of a significant role for class. He explores the significance of gender, but finds that it didn't greatly affect the newly emerging political system. Another progressive innovation in the structure of politics was a new city charter, approved in 1909, that diminished the political significance of wards. Connolly argues that the new charter, though intended to create unity, actually encouraged division.

With the decline in parties as the means of political expression, and the decline of wards as the sites where partisan activities took place, non-partisan civic organizations became the chief means by which individuals—mostly those of the middle and upper class—participated in the new politics of progressivism. Working class and ethnic neighborhoods were largely cut off from these new avenues to political influence. Connolly also notes the redefinition of corruption: "reformers described corruption as a systemic problem, whereas previous generations had defined it as an individual moral failing" (p. 91). This reconceptualization of corruption also contributed to the emergence of a new form of ethnic political mobilization.

"Ethnic leaders," Connolly specifies, "found in Progressivism and its assault on city politics a for-

mula with which to pursue their own ends" (p. 56). Though Boston politicians, including Martin Lomasny and John Fitzgerald, had long made ethnic appeals, the master of the new ethnic progressivism was James Curley, who built a career on two arguments: that the most fundamental cleavage in Boston life was between the Yankee Brahmin "interests" and the Irish Catholic "people," and that only James Curley could stand up to those selfish and even corrupt interests on behalf of the people. Connolly describes Curley not as the one of last of the nineteenth-century political bosses but as "one of the first of a new breed" who was "among the earliest masters of the new mass-mediated, candidate-centered politics ushered in by Progressive reform" (p. 135). Curley appropriated the language of progressivism that focused on corruption and self-interest and turned it against the very classes that, in many historians' analyses, were the progenitors of progressivism, the WASP middle and upper classes. His success, Connolly claims, derived not from a smoothly functioning machine but from his ability to manipulate public discourse. Parties themselves were transformed by progressivism, "from grassroots organizations to publicity-based, candidate-centered operations" that were "an extension of the politician, rather than vice versa" (p. 153), and Curley reshaped Boston's Democratic party in his own image. For a generation, Curley usually managed to win elections by appealing to the Irish Catholic majority on the basis that they were being treated badly and failing to receive their fair share because of machinations by the vested interests of the old, moneyed, Protestant upper class. Connolly argues that the result was the creation of a sense of Boston Irish identity that defined itself as the perpetual underdog, as an embattled minority, even though it was in fact the politically dominant majority. This did not change in the 1920s—instead, the intensified ethnic conflict of the 1920s in Boston was the direct outgrowth of the changes of the progressive era. Thus, according to Connolly, "modern politics,

ushered in by Progressivism, redefined and intensified ethnic identification and antagonism" (p. 189). This is the triumph of ethnic progressivism in his title, and he suggests that it fed directly into the bitter and vicious confrontations over school desegregation that rocked Boston in the 1970s.

Connolly's arguments are persuasive. Indeed, his picture of nineteenth-century parties smothering ethnic conflict in the interest of coalitional politics, and of the willingness of ambitious politicians to exploit ethnic antagonisms once those restraints were removed, even suggests parallels to Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Even so, this is one of the two aspects of Connolly's treatment of Boston that deserve the closest scrutiny; the other is his argument that the discourse of progressivism not only glossed over class but actually precluded class from becoming a significant factor in local politics. Regarding the first, one suspects that the parties may not have been as successful in channeling ethnic conflict into partisan competition as Connolly argues. In the 1880s and 1890s in the Middle West, for example, some party leaders played on such issues as prohibition and school attendance in a way that sharpened (rather than muted) ethnic conflict and increased the ethnic differences between the parties. Regarding the second, class seems to have played a larger role in other cities than Connolly credits it with in Boston. Though he downplays the significance of class—which, after all, may also be seen as socially constructed—it nonetheless emerges in the form of the upper-class and middle-class Good Government Association as symbolic of the Brahmin interests that Curley flayed in the interests of creating support among working-class and lower middle-class Irish voters.

Connolly's work suggests the need for comparisons. Just how successful were nineteenth-century parties in smothering ethnic antagonisms in other places? To what extent did the political changes of the progressive era lead to the emergence in other places of the pattern of ethnic poli-

tics that developed in Boston? By asking those questions and finding answers, we shall also begin to understand the extent to which Boston, Curley, and the ethnic antagonisms he fostered may have been anomalous or typical. Boston was unusual among the nation's largest cities in having an Irish Catholic majority during the progressive era, though some of the other New England cities showed similar ethnic patterns. Milwaukee came close to having a German majority, but there ethnicity and class converged to create the basis for a long-lasting socialist city administration that, in all current treatments, focused more on class than ethnicity in mobilizing voters. San Francisco, ethnically diverse during the early twentieth-century, divided politically largely along class lines. But new considerations of politics in other localities should be informed by the reconceptualization of progressivism that Connolly, while not creating, nonetheless brings so nicely into focus. And such research into the politics of that era also needs to be informed by understandings about the social construction, not only of ethnicity, but also of class and gender (and also age and disability and perhaps other categories of identity). If such identities are socially constructed, then it seems not just logical but even glaringly obvious that politics must have played some role in that process of social construction.

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