Jim Bissett has written a fine work explaining the early twentieth century success of the Socialist Party in Oklahoma by focusing on the clearly defined question of, why Oklahoma? In the Debsian heyday of the Socialist Party of America, the fastest-growing, most successful state organization was not in the industrialized cosmopolitan Northeast, nor even in Victor Berger's Midwest, but in the poverty-stricken, cotton-ridden, Southern-yeoman-dominated bastion of cultural and religious "conservatism" that was Oklahoma. Bissett is not the first to take a stab at interpreting this intriguing phenomenon; he is, however, the most successful to date due to disciplined focus, clear arguments, and a challenge to his readers to rethink the relationship between the leaders and the led in agrarian protest politics.

This slender monograph is organized into chronological chapters, limited in scope to the rise and fall of the Farmers' Union in Oklahoma, 1904-1907, and the the rise of the Oklahoma Socialist Party, 1907-1917. As the Farmers' Union fell, many among the aggrieved rank-and-file found their way into the Oklahoma Socialist Party, which was reshaped into a remarkably successful protest vehicle between 1910-1917, before being wrecked by the repressive wartime "politics of crisis" of 1917-1920.

Bissett brings to his account an energetic and unabashed sympathy for the cause of the Oklahoma plain folk protesters that could be called bias but which we may just as well call point of view. In a typical passage, he finds the large landowners' proposals to the Farmers' Union to concentrate on "scientific farming" over the more militant "crop withholding" to be "yet another familiar diversionary tactic" (p. 30). Readers who do not share Bissett's point of view may be put off by the constancy of his perspective while others will find this only adds to their enjoyment of a work marked by concise clarity of writing.

The best rebuttal to charges of bias lies in the strength of a work's scholarship. Here, Bissett is on firm, well-cultivated, ground. He takes adequate note of previous major interpretations [Garin Burbank's When Farmers Voted Red (1976), Howard Meredith's "A History of the Socialist Party in Oklahoma" (University of Oklahoma, PhD
diss., 1969), and James R. Green's *Grassroots Socialism* (1978) while succeeding in making a unique contribution. Bissett's work is based on his examination of over thirty local Socialist and Farmers' Union newspapers, collections of papers of the principals involved, as well as a significant amount of data on agriculture and voting behavior. Interlarded throughout is evidence of a thorough reading of the secondary literature on early-statehood Oklahoma.

Bissett identifies four factors that he argues explain the Oklahoma Socialists' relative success. First, the Farmers' Union provided experienced protest leaders. Second, the political wars the Farmers' Union fought produced a class conscious farmer community with a "sophisticated" understanding of how the commercial agricultural system victimized farmers. Third, the specifics of the Farmers' Union experience hardened farmers' attachment to decentralized and democratic organizational structure, an attachment they vigorously enforced on their adopted vehicle of protest, the Socialist Party. And, finally, the ubiquitous evangelical Protestantism of rural Oklahomans reinforced the Socialists' radical critique of the marketplace.

While not all Farmers' Union leaders migrated to the Socialist Party, Bissett maintains that the rank-and-file provided the basis of Socialist support, due to the Union's specific failings. The Farmers' Union boomed in the Sooner state between 1904 and 1907 as long as it represented "working farmers" and stood for fundamental reforms to the structure of commercial agriculture. Under the guidance of old Alliancemen and Populists, the Union at first rejected landlord control and backed cooperative schemes such as "crop withholding" and marketing "clearinghouses" for both buying and selling similar to the old Farmers' Alliance Exchanges of the 1880s. By 1906, however, this militant agenda was under full attack from within and without. Within the Union the "large landowners" and landlords sought to seize leadership from the reformers and guide the Union into something resembling a professional association suited to their interests. They succeeded in taking over nominal leadership of the Union but at tremendous cost. Believing the Union no longer represented their interests, "working farmers" (smallholders and tenants) abandoned it with alacrity, reducing its membership from seventy thousand to three thousand in one year. From without, commercial interests from furnishing merchants to banks and coal mines boycotted the Union's "clearinghouse" marketing efforts. The Union failed, Bissett opines, due to the "coercion" of the capitalists and the "co-optation" of the landlords.

Class conscious ex-Farmers' Unionists, Bissett's second factor, found no relief in the Democratic Party whose leaders were the same landlords who had just hijacked the Union. The detailed understanding of commercial agriculture such Union veterans had earned between 1904-1907 further alienated them from the Democratic Party and its elite leadership. Thus, many turned to the infant Socialist Party just entering Oklahoma via organizers from the Midwest. Bolstered by some ex-Populists, the Oklahoma Socialist Party began attracting tenants and other "working farmers" with its denunciation of the current state of affairs.

Bissett's third major factor in explaining the growth of the Socialist Party in Oklahoma has to do with the determinedly democratic tendencies of the Farmers' Union veterans making up the party rank-and-file. This produced two transformations within the Socialist Party which gained it greater acceptance among Oklahomans. The Sooner radicals immediately rejected the authoritarian party structure presented to them by Victor Berger's Milwaukee-trained organizers. Their wariness, he argues, sprang from their all-too-recent betrayal at the hands of their erstwhile Farmers' Union leaders. Before Oklahoma farmers voted Socialist, they remade the Party from the bot-
tom up in their own decentralized and democratic image. With restructuring in place they were ready to effect another change that would soon garner the Socialist Party over forty-five thousand gubernatorial votes and brief second party status in Oklahoma. This substantive change centered on the tension between Marxist "orthodoxy" on the one hand versus the cultural expectations and practical experiences of the plain folk on the other. The infant Sooner Socialist party called for total collectivization of landownership as per Marxian theory as interpreted by Midwestern, urban laborites. Bissett claims the plain folk rejected this formula immediately; and, certainly, Party candidates got nowhere with Oklahoma voters until after the 1910 land compromise. Oklahomans demanded a redefinition of the land issue, explaining that farmers wanted less concentration of ownership, not more. Unburdened by attachment to dogma, they freely revised Marx by identifying the exploitation of labor, not ownership itself, as the sin of property. Thus, the Oklahomans led the Socialist Party of America to embrace the property rights of family farmers who worked their own land. Moreover, the Party promised a more widespread distribution of landownership among current tenants as an alternative to public ownership of all agricultural acreage. Herein, according to the author, lies the Jeffersonian connection, for in advocating widespread ownership of the land among the plain folk, Oklahoma socialists were cleaving to their own republican political heritage.

Bissett's fourth and final factor centers on the symbiosis between agrarian radicalism and evangelical Christianity. The rhetorical change that defined Oklahoma Socialism, the author argues convincingly, was the adoption of the language of the rural evangelical Protestant church as the chief method of propagation. Others, including James R. Green in *Grassroots Socialism*, have noted this feature without articulating it as thoroughly or accurately as Bissett. While Green sees Socialists' evangelical rhetoric as, at best, a propaganda device, and, at worst, an embarrassing betrayal of true scientific materialism, Bissett makes the connection between the rural protesters' faith and their critique of the capitalist marketplace. Indeed, the local leadership of the rural church was often also the local leadership of the Socialist Party. Southern Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, and Pentecostal ministers and pastors played a disproportionately large role as Socialist candidates, organizers, and lecturers. From their perspective, socialism's goals for society had more in common with the gospel of Christ than did the outcomes of the early twentieth century marketplace.

One minor issue of definition arises regarding what to call the rural evangelical Protestants Bissett focuses on. His oft-repeated label "fundamentalist" could use a bit of refining. He uses the term in the broad, journalistic sense that weakens its historical meaningfulness. In one sentence he lumps Primitive Baptists and Pentecostals into the category of fundamentalist. As Calvinists, Primitive Baptists could hardly be said to be fundamentalists. Further, historians of fundamentalism such as George Marsden tend to view Wesleyan Pentecostals as emanating from outside the fundamentalist stream even if, like some fundamentalist denominations, they often represented the economically "dispossessed." Readers will not be too distracted by this, perhaps, because they will know (or think they know) what he means: rural, Bible-based, pietistic (as opposed to liturgical), and of a communitarian culture holding all conduct (including economic) to clearly elucidated local standards of behavior.

This well-organized and clearly-presented work is a valuable introduction to Southwestern agrarian radicalism for students as well as a helpful guide to scholars in the field. Readers encounter straightforward explanations of "the land question" in the Southwest, early twentieth century farm tenancy (complete with crop liens and furnishing merchants), as well as an introduction
to the Farmers' Union and the Democratic and Socialist parties in Oklahoma, 1904-1920. This work would strengthen any advanced undergraduate or graduate readings course on the New South or the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

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