

**Jamie L. Bronstein.** *Land Reform and Working Class Experience in Britain and the United States 1800-1862.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999. x + 372 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-3451-6.



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Americans have always regarded the ownership of land as central to the "American Dream." Barring those who live in New York, Americans believe that it is almost their birthright to own their own home and land. When interest rates rise, politicians immediately trumpet alarm that the "American Dream" is in danger.

Jamie Bronstein's study *Land Reform and Working Class Experience in the Britain and the United States, 1800-1862* compares land reform movements in both countries. Bronstein demonstrates that the American dream, ownership of land, was a solution among radicals in both countries to the problems of industrial labor. The major difference, however, was in the governments, supportive in the United States, hostile in England. Bronstein argues that land reform was not a middle-class movement that distracted workers from their real objectives, but a sophisticated critique of capitalism and urban poverty. Bronstein shares the views of those who have seen American populists as progressive, not reactionary, looking toward a new organization of society (p. 4).

The Chartists in Britain turned their attentions to land reform after having failed to win universal suffrage. Led by the quixotic Fergus O'Connor, the Chartists argued that the autonomy of owning one's own land, small as it might be, was far preferable to the stultifying labor in factories. Forming their own company, they opened offices and gave applicants allotments of between two and four acres which were financed by subscriptions. Ultimately the movement failed as the Society was unable to gain incorporation and ran into financial difficulties, in the end unsuccessfully seeking to get rents from the poor allotment holders.

The reform movement in America was led by George Henry Evans, a former labor radical who during the Depression of 1837 had become a melon farmer. Restarting his newspaper, *Working Man's Advocate*, his National Reform movement advocated the transformation of workers into farmers as a solution to the deteriorating plight of industrialized labor. This movement found followers in the anti-rent counties upstate of upstate New York, as well as in the factory-filled areas of

New England and in the midwest. This movement grew and ultimately found success in the passage of the Homestead Act of 1862.

The intellectual roots of the movement are traced to Harrington, Paine, and Jefferson, stressing the links of land and citizenship, the connection of farming and virtue and the idea of the safety valve. There were radical elements as well, such as Thomas Spence and Thomas Skidmore, who advocated expropriation of all lands. But the two movements refused to reject private property or to advocate land redistribution.

The rhetoric of land reform in both countries focused on the degradation of labor into a poverty-stricken proletariat. Reform advocates stressed the dark side of factory life: of workers becoming slaves to machines; of the damage done to young girls; and of the dangerous physical environment. This was contrasted to pure country air, bountiful orchards and freedom from want. Christian concepts were commonly invoked, including the coming Jubilee, a sign of the redemption of land. Advocates often invoked the Bible, particularly the line from Micah: "At rest you shall sit, each of you with his own vine, his own fig-tree to give him shade, and none to raise alarm."

An additional theme was patriotism, particularly in America where the Jeffersonian vision was invoked as a means of saving republicanism against the aristocracy of avarice. Finally proponents of land reform declared that it would allow women to return to their natural domestic position rather than the unnatural workplace, the factory.

One of the most interesting chapters deals with the land reformers' attitudes towards slavery, particularly from the American side. A number were abolitionists, including Evans, but others were racists and all feared the entry of black labor into the labor market. Some, including Thomas Spence, argued that wage slavery was worse than chattel slavery, which in turn brought the ire of abolitionists upon the movement. Even

so, they did manage to convince abolitionist Gerrit Smith of the wisdom of free land, and he donated some of his upstate New York acres to landless blacks. In this era of reform, land reformers had to compete for public attention; abolition was considered a competing movement, and was regarded as such. There were other reform movements which influenced the land reform movement, such as the Fourierists in America. However, these groups believed that small land grants acceptable to National Reform were inadequate; instead, these groups advocated communal living. In England, the Chartists found serious competition in the Anti-Corn Law League.

Bronstein details the means of dissemination, including newspapers, carnival-like gatherings, and revivals. She also shows how much of the leadership of the two groups communicated with each other and often had experience on both sides of the Atlantic. The Chartist movement had greater influence on American reform than vice-versa, but each was aware of each other.

Bronstein points to differences in the membership of both sides. In America land reform appealed largely to established, married artisans with little property and was a political movement from which women were excluded. In England, its appeal was to factory workers. Reformers relied on paid subscriptions, and women were included. Middle-class artisans and their institutions and patrons did not support the movement. Class and class conflict were much more in the open in Britain.

Bronstein attributes the ultimate success of the goals of the National Reform crusade in America to the different attitudes of the state toward the rank-and-file of the two movements. In the United States the government considered workingmen citizens, not subjects, and believed that land reformers followed an American tradition of voluntary association. American workers viewed themselves as free agents who had a right to demand the public lands. In Britain they were re-

garded as dangerous, and their increasingly unstable leader, O'Connor, particularly so.

In America, the National Reform movement's influence continued into the 1850s, as did the national debate over whether the government should grant free land to homesteaders. On the one side were reformers who advocated land as a solution to urban problems, the right of all citizens to land, and land as a means of uplifting the poor and opposing monopoly and the degradation, even enslavement, of the American worker. On the other side were those who saw free land as dangerous agrarian policy, or as a reward for a lack of industry. The Free Soil movement adapted programs of National Reform which were then adopted by the Republican Party. In 1862 the Homestead Act was passed, but Bronstein argues that the turning point in this legislation was in the 1850s when congressional sentiment moved in that direction. She also sees it as an anticlimax, for in the 1860s there was no serious passage of American labor to the west nor was the labor movement advocating that as the solution to problems of the marketplace.

This is a worthy study. It deftly reveals the ups and downs of the two movements. The comparative style is very useful in depicting the differing relationships between the two governments and the working classes, and how that clearly shaped success or failure. It calls to mind a comparison I once drew between America and Britain in the tense 1790s.[1] In that era Britain turned on its working class, fearing them as pro-Jacobin, holding notorious treason trials and passing harsh repressive, even draconian legislation. In America, however, the Jeffersonians, backed by the nation's artisans, overthrew the Federalists and inaugurated the Jeffersonian era. There, too, as with the land reformers, the Jeffersonians were not strongly interested in the overthrow of slavery. Fifty years later, similar contrasts remain.

There are a few problems. I kept wondering just how large the movement was. Bronstein

notes that land reform recruited 130,000 followers (p.18) in both countries, but it is not clear how that number is arrived at. My sense is that in Britain the movement --with its zenith at the last, dying moments of Chartism -- touched relatively few workers. Its appeal in America was stronger, though there, too, the evidence does not necessarily demonstrate this. There were petitions and newspapers of relatively low circulation. Just how deeply did it penetrate into the working class? Could the fact that by the 1860s the Homestead Act was largely advocated by farmers and western interests and was not celebrated by the urban working class indicate that its impact was limited?

Bronstein takes Sean Wilentz to task for referring to the land reform movement as New York's "first truly petit-bourgeois radical movement"[2] since she sees land reformers as working-class radicals with an interest in political economy and overarching goals "to eliminate monopoly and elevate the 'producers' however defined." (p.185) This is not entirely fair to Wilentz who does argue that in the 1840s the "land reform's stress on labor's plight and, in particular, on the economic relationships that undermined independence explicitly linked their cause to the concerns of exploited wage earners as well as to those of petty producers." [3] They were "anti-capitalist" in their analysis of working conditions. Moreover, their goal was not expropriation, but individual land ownership, part of the Jeffersonian vision. Certainly this could indicate that there were strong middle-class aspirations among many of the followers of the movement.

This is an important comparative study that sheds considerable light on the state of the antebellum labor movements and labor aspirations in America and the languishing of such hope in Britain.

#### Notes

[1]. Howard B. Rock, "The Artisan and the State in the 1790s: A Comparison of New York and

London," in Paul A. Gilje and William Pencak, eds., *New York in the Age of the Constitution, 1775-1800* (Canbury, New Jersey, 1992), pp. 74-97.

2. *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1985), p. 342.

3. Ibid., p. 343.

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