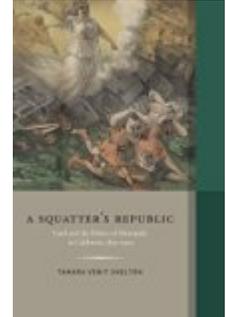


Tamara Venit Shelton. *A Squatter's Republic: Land and the Politics of Monopoly in California, 1850-1900.* Western Histories Series. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. viii + 277 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87328-255-0.



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Commissioned by K. Stephen Prince (University of South Florida)

A Squatter's Republic delivers a riveting history of legal strategizing, identity negotiation, economic transitions, and even some Old West violence. Tamara Venit Shelton assesses the early California squatters' anti-land monopoly movement, tracing its maturation into a much broader anti-monopoly movement linked with national and international thought. She argues that the early anti-land monopoly squatters saw themselves as righteous guards of the classical liberal American dream, but the onset of the Gilded Age would see many who supported the cause eventually warm to some kinds of government-controlled monopoly. The book's engagement with historiography is brief in the introduction, though the footnotes are thorough. Throughout the work, Shelton interweaves ethnic, political, economic, and cultural histories, presenting an excellent example of history that breaks down the silos of more classical frameworks and moves beyond an analysis of elected leaders debating questions of land and monopoly.

While state histories can sometimes be myopic in focus, Shelton's work hardly suffers from this. She ties the local, national, and—in some instances—international together so well it is difficult to categorize it as just a state history. Shelton capably laces the peculiarities of late nineteenth-century California and the West with the massive changes going on in the rest of the United States. She brings readers from an almost inconsequential squatters' riot in 1849 Sacramento through to the development of Progressive Era reforms by tracing the ways in which Californians and Americans thought about land ownership and conceptualized excess in the form of monopoly. This is a truly western story. For a book set between 1850 and 1900 in the United States, the Civil War was peripheral to this narrative and the slavery question receives treatment only in relation to broader property and land questions in Kansas. Chinese exclusion, labor, and land rights—issues at the core of late nineteenth-century western history—are seen through the lens of antimonopolism.

Central to the book, and to the evolution of the antimonopolist ethos, was Henry George. Most famous for his *Progress and Poverty* (1879), George had many editorial outlets with several newspapers. Shelton uses his rhetoric to define early antimonopolism. He argued that monopolies enabled speculators to both consolidate wealth and alienate landless men who, with ever-limited options in an industrializing era, were forced to become tramps or squatters in search of land to work. Applying agrarian antimonopolist thinking to this industrial age, George believed that “the only true title to the land was its occupation and use” (p. 92), which Shelton links to the gold rush squatters who are the focus of the book’s opening. Those holding large tracts of land that they did not work or even allow others to work (speculators) were violating this true title. Although he helped define the antimonopolist ethos, George’s support of racist policies like Chinese exclusion separated him from many of his subscribers. He “understood anti-land monopolism and exclusionism as linked remedies for the same social malady: the erosion of liberal, agrarian ideals in industrialized economies” (p. 98). While George and many other antimonopolists held racist beliefs about the Chinese population, the book shows that the reasons for racism varied greatly and were affected by broader issues tied to liberalism, industrialization, and corporatization.

Shelton consistently argues that antimonopolists were not a unified group. She shows that in many cases the line between a speculator and a squatter was blurred or even erased as one became the other. Antimonopolists came to the issue from varying backgrounds, but “the common threat that tied [them] together was the desire to protect free competition among small proprietors and producers in an era characterized by increasing consolidation and large-scale industrialization” (p. 179). This commonality led to a partnership between George and Terence Powderly, head of the Knights of Labor. The simple life of small freeholders resonated especially well with dis-

placed industrial laborers in the late nineteenth century. Though both the labor and antimonopolist cause benefited from one another, their ties would end in 1896 when Powderly and George refused to support the many strikes that broke out that year. The two men believed strikes to be ineffective at ending the truest tyranny (land monopoly), and charged that strikes were a distraction at best, actually destructive to their movement at worst. It is essential to note that even in this break, the antimonopolists did not turn to the socialists, with whom a partnership might seem natural. Antimonopolists did not see wealth accumulation as an evil as did the socialists; their enemy was simply accumulation to the point of nonproductive excess.

Ultimately, the Gilded Age’s extreme ups and downs combined with the seemingly ceaseless drive toward industrialization, vertical integration, and corporatism proved to be too overwhelming a tide for the majority of Americans. It seemed that the liberal agrarian yeoman would have no place in the next century. This was supported by a growing group of economic “experts” who declared certain modernizing industries—the railroad and the telegraph in particular—to be “natural” monopolies that required both government subsidy and relaxation of monopoly mores and regulations in order to grow and become profitable. Without government involvement, speculation could go wild and the country could find itself in 1873 or 1893 once more. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, Shelton shows, the final iteration of antimonopolism developed: one that allowed “natural” monopolies, but sought government regulation. She argues that this was the foundation for Progressive Era thinking; if monopolies could not be stopped, then legislation would be the only means by which they could be controlled.

Two small critiques must be made. The addition of more maps showing how large the land holdings were and how land claims changed over

time would have helped in showing readers the geographic scope of Shelton's topic. At rare times, Shelton's detail and narrative crafting can feel as though it is getting in the way of directly making her point. This typically comes in the form of presenting a series of quotations taken from diaries or newspaper accounts. Be patient. It is in these exchanges that she frames the intellectual context within which her larger analysis sits. Shelton marshals a variety of sources from newspapers and novels to diaries and letters to support her argument, and she does so well. Indeed, her use of first-person accounts serves to humanize a question that can, particularly to students, seem a very distant one. The book would be an engaging read for undergraduates, but carries enough depth that it would serve as an excellent addition to graduate courses as well.

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