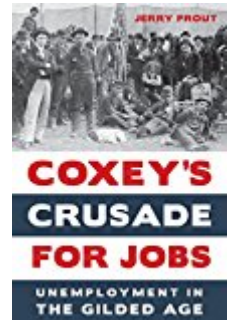


**Jerry Prout.** *Coxey's Crusade for Jobs: Unemployment in the Gilded Age.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016. 184 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-87580-498-9.



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Jerry Prout's book, *Coxey's Crusade for Jobs: Unemployment in the Gilded Age*, examines the 1894 march on Washington, DC, by unemployed workers. Focusing specifically on Coxey's Army (the name given to the marching workers), Prout argues that the marching workers combined older Populist concerns over Gilded Age economics with newly emerging strategies of social reform.

The march itself was planned and led by Jacob Coxey, a wealthy Ohio businessman, and his partner Carl Browne, a Californian Populist reformer with a talent for organizing and planning public spectacles. Both had met in Chicago, and from that meeting begun planning a public demonstration to raise awareness and produce change in economic and political policies for the working class. This was all in response to what Browne, Coxey, and others saw as the ravaging effects of the Panic of 1893 on the working class. As Prout chronicles, the idea for a march quickly formed, with Coxey's hometown of Massillon, Ohio, chosen as the starting point. From there Coxey, Browne, and the unemployed workers

marched to Washington, DC. The two men believed that the spectacle of a marching "army" of unemployed workers would make visible both the problem of unemployment and their proposed solutions, forcing the federal government to act.

Coxey's plan for addressing unemployment was multifaceted, but centered on two main ideas. First was a push for bimetallism and a drastic increase of the money supply. Second, Coxey argued for a massive expansion of federal spending on public works, specifically roads and public infrastructure. It was this second point that Coxey championed most heavily during the march, referring to the policy as a "Good Roads Program." In theory, Prout explains, "[the plan] would provide every unemployed American with a job that would pay 1.50 a day.... As he described in a seemingly endless stream of promotional bulletins and pamphlets, Coxey's five-hundred million Good Roads Plan called on the federal government to issue non-interest-bearing bonds that could be issued by any subdivision of government for the purpose of raising money to build roads or other

public works” (p.4). This ambitious proposal, Coxey claimed, would both eliminate unemployment and improve America’s road system.

Both of these ideas, then, heralded the coming of the New Deal era as well as reflected the growing power of the US labor movement. By arguing for an increase in money, government assistance in employment, and social democratic spending, Coxey and his army spoke to a growing frustration with some of the elected Populist political leaders in Congress.

Though Coxey called himself a “Populist,” what set him apart from many of his fellow-minded colleagues was his willingness to take his argument outside the meetinghouse and convention halls where Populist reformers often spoke to one another or argued among themselves over platform planks” and engage politics in the street and press via direct demonstration.

Coxey’s embrace of street protest was made necessary by the major losses that the People’s Party had suffered in 1892. In the aftermath of the election, the fourteen Populists who were left in Congress “had already begun to turn to the established parties to find common ground” (p. 4). Focused on their own political survival, these elected officials were wary to endorse Coxey, the marchers, or their plans to alter the political economy of the Gilded Age.

Ultimately Coxey’s Army failed to convince Congress to adopt the Good Roads Program. Instead, upon entering DC on May 1, 1894, they were attacked by police and arrested. Not permitted to deliver his speech, refused hearings in Congress, and faced with growing restlessness among the marchers and the boredom of the press, Coxey and his movement quickly stalled and disbanded a few weeks later. Nevertheless, even though Coxey’s Army never made it to Congress, the widespread coverage of the march (according to Prout, the single most-reported story since the Civil War) meant that the marchers were able to shift thinking about unemployment in very profound ways.

Prout argues that the marchers gained sympathy from embedded newspaper reporters like Ray Stannard Baker who accompanied the marchers. This in turn influenced their later coverage of workers’ struggles in the Progressive era. “Baker’s articles,” Prout writes, “like those of other reporters who marched with Coxey ... helped portray the marchers as human beings, not as the tramps and vagabonds the public conceived. Readers came to see the marchers as genuine farmers or workingmen searching for the next job” (p. 5).

Prout’s interpretation challenges and adds much to the established historiography of Coxey’s Army. Much of the original historical research on the march was quite negative. Donald McMurry’s 1929 *Coxey’s Army: A Study of the Industrial Army Movement of 1894* not only emphasized negative newspaper coverage from the time, but also contributed to it. Arguing the march was confused, possibly dangerous, and incapable of accepting the finer points of America’s “self-made man” political economy, McMurry portrayed Coxey as a failed revolutionary. A half-century later, Carlos Schwantes challenged McMurry’s interpretation in his 1985 book, *Coxey’s Army: An American Odyssey*. In that text, Schwantes availed himself of the extensive new scholarship on the Populist movement, much of which had been done in the 1960s and 1970s. Thinkers such as Richard Hofstadter, Lawrence Goodwyn, and Norman Pollock were far more open to taking Populism seriously. As Prout described Schwantes work, “by the time Carlos Schwantes wrote his own account of Coxey’s Army, the historiography of Populism had evolved” (p. 6).

Prout builds on this tradition, but argues that Coxey’s Army itself was an event that “transcends its place in the Populist moment. In this interpretation, Coxey’s March is characterized as significant because it represents an important transitional event ... it blurs neat chronological divides” (p. 7). Prout’s argument buttresses that of Lucy

Barber, whose 2004 book, *Marching on Washington*, argued that Coxey's Army initiated a tradition of marching on the capital that has produced some of the most dramatic demonstrations of popular power in United States history.

Significantly, Prout also suggests that the movement was antiracist. Not only speaking to the concerns of many urban workers (many of whom were African American), Browne and Coxey appointed an African American worker to be the flag-bearer at the front of the procession as they marched through DC to Capitol Hill. Prout argues, both in the book and in a 2013 *Washington History* article, that Coxey's Army spoke directly to the concerns of the unemployed African Americans in DC. For this reason, *The Washington Bee* and other major African American newspapers provided sympathetic coverage of Coxey's Army. Prout's contention that Coxey's Army was antiracist raises several important questions. Was the inclusion of African Americans in the march merely symbolic? Or, did it reflect an actual commitment to antiracism? How did African American workers perceive their relationship to the march? These and other questions will provide useful guidance for future research.

Prout provides an important work in the historiography of Coxey's Army, the history of unemployment, and the broader history of the Gilded Age. Prout uses his history of Coxey's Army to illuminate multiple strains of Populism in the 1890s. This important contribution challenges historians to think about the ways in which Populism had multiple potentials, as well as how it survived into the New Deal era and shaped thinking of future government officials and reformers. Well researched and well written, this work is highly recommended for those interested in Coxey's Army, the history of unemployment, and the longer legacies of American protests.

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