



Charles Postel. *Equality: An American Dilemma, 1866-1896.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019. 400 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-7963-6.

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Published on H-CivWar (May, 2020)

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It has been twelve years since Charles Postel published his seminal book on the Populist movement of the 1890s, *The Populist Vision*. In his latest book, *Equality: An American Dilemma, 1866-1896*, Postel backs up a generation and visits some of the forerunners of the Populists, attempting to untie the Gordian knot of equal rights issues in the thirty years following the Civil War. He frames this period as one in which Americans not only sought out the best course for reunification of the nation, but also explored and pushed the boundaries of the meaning of equality. Arguing that equality for some came at the expense of African Americans and other minorities, he highlights three organizations—the Grange, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), and the Knights of Labor—to show how these goals at times overlapped and at other times fell short of their egalitarian rhetoric. Much like the Populists of Postel’s previous book, whose “commitment to biracial cooperation was more rhetorical than substantive,” all of these organizations, while promoting different causes, collaborated under shared interests and constituencies and helped determine who would (and would not) be the beneficiaries to new claims of equality in the post-Civil War era.[1]

While the Civil War destroyed slavery, the subsequent Reconstruction era navigated new terrain as emancipation and unification brought new

questions regarding the human condition in America. Evolving meanings of equality created new interest groups to stake their claims. Within the Grange, farmers sought commercial equality in the face of monopolists. For the WCTU, gender equality was paramount in order to protect vulnerable family members from intemperate men. And for the Knights of Labor, equality meant recognizing the “industrial and moral” worth of wage earners (p. 175). Initially, each group was also nominally committed to racial equality. So while each group started with laudable goals, ultimately equality for these social movements came at the expense of equality for freed slaves and immigrants. For the Grange, that meant advocating for the rights of the southern planter; for the WCTU, adopting “Redemption Feminists” who promoted women’s rights while defending the lynching of black men; and for the Knights of Labor, it meant resisting social equality and black assemblies of the Knights being met with violence (p. 148).

Postel also explains how the three organizations borrowed from and cooperated with each other to achieve their goals. The Knights of Labor structured their organization as an expansive version of the Grange, finding allure in the secrecy, ceremony, and white brotherhood of the Freemasons. Yet the Grange promoted equal women’s rights, as did the WCTU. The WCTU and the labor

movement also found a natural alliance, as workers who drank were a danger to themselves, their fellow workers, and their families. The three groups also initially attempted to remain politically nonpartisan, but eventually acquiesced to the rising conservative political forces that witnessed the end of Reconstruction and the increasing white supremacist rhetoric of the South.

One of the major issues of the period was how to reunite a fractured country. The Grange, WCTU, and Knights all promoted sectional reconciliation, recognizing that southern support was necessary to achieve their organization goals. Oliver Kelley, Frances Willard, and Terence Powderly all embarked on tours of the former Confederate states in their capacity as organizational leaders. In each case they emerged from the South convinced, having received a heaping dose of Southern charm, that the Civil War was ultimately an “unfortunate misunderstanding” (p. 246). New alliances with the white elite of the South helped grow the power and prestige of each organizational leader, but also required them to abandon any commitment they had to black equality.

Postel’s work is a welcome contribution to the historiography of the post-Civil War era. He exposes the nuances of the meaning of equality while deepening our understanding of social movements in the late nineteenth century. As Keri Leigh Merritt describes the plight of antebellum poor whites in *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (2017), Postel describes how many of those non-elite whites formed associations as equality came to refer not just to democratic legal reforms but also to equality of opportunity. Farmers, women, and wage-earners, who before the Civil War had little to no hope of being an important part of the body politic, suddenly found themselves important constituents in a growing egalitarian movement.

Postel ends his narrative with the same Populists he wrote about twelve years prior, arguing that the Populist movement “marked the cresting

of the post-Civil War egalitarian wage” (p. 306). In no place was that movement more successful than in North Carolina during the Fusion period, the political alliance between Republicans and Populists, which ultimately succumbed to the white supremacy movement of the North Carolina Democratic Party and the bloody coup d’état in Wilmington. And ultimately the Populist movement failed, much like the three organizations described in *Equality*, because the “movement contained too many diverse and contradictory elements to speak of a single Populist social blueprint.”[2] Just as African Americans found a spark of hope in the Grange, the WCTU, and the Knights of Labor, the latter all eventually failed to bring true equality.

It is impossible to read Postel’s tome in 2020 without reflecting on the ways claims to equal opportunity in the late nineteenth century reflect contemporary inequalities. By the late nineteenth century, legal and political elites like Supreme Court Justice Stephen J. Field found ways to use the Fourteenth Amendment—designed to protect newly emancipated citizens—to shield corporate interests from claims to individual parity. Corporations began to stake their claims to equality, setting a precedent for contemporary corporate personhood, while state and local governments continued to reproduce white supremacist attitudes and enact new ways to disenfranchise and marginalize minorities. While the collective efforts by the organizations Postel details were deeply flawed, he is correct to point out that in order to remedy today’s increasing inequality, the solution may be “found in collective efforts, the multiple struggles of women and men to realize their visions of a just and equal society” (p. 318).

Notes

[1]. Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19.

[2]. *Ibid.*, 288.

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Citation: Virginia Summey. Review of Postel, Charles. *Equality: An American Dilemma, 1866-1896*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2020.

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