



**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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### Progressive-Era Equality

Social commentators, media pundits, and on-line journalists are steadily becoming vexed by the growing evidence that social inequality is a defining feature of modern America. Economists both popular and academic have added their voices to the chorus of critics concerned about the polarization of wealth and power in American society. Comparisons to the American Gilded Age of craven excess and conspicuous class conflict have become almost *de rigueur* as commentators seek to make sense of what seems like an unprecedented period of downward mobility and corporate ascendancy. Historians Noam Maggor (*Brahmin Capitalism: Frontiers of Wealth and Populism in America's First Gilded Age*, 2017), Richard White (*The Republic for Which it Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age*, 2019), and Jack Beatty (*The Age of Betrayal: The Triumph of Money in America, 1865-1900*, 2008) have each recently examined the Gilded Age, producing weighty tomes that speak as much to our era as they do to the famed period of railroads, robber barons, brahmin capitalists, and class revolt. It is in this spirit that Charles Postel turns his attention to some of the leading popular (one is tempted to write populist, given Postel's earlier interests) groups. These sought to advance organization and equality, national coordination and anti-

monopoly action, all in an environment suffused with racial and ethnic bigotry. The results were uneven, to say the least.

As in his analysis of the Populist movement (*The Populist Vision*, 2006), Postel is intrigued by farmers' organizations that espoused an egalitarian vision that was both modernizing and forward-looking. Examining the Patrons of Husbandry, Postel argues that they were "part of the bureaucratic project" (p. 18). They built a "movement with a wide membership base, a uniform and centralized organizational system, and a national scope" (p. 19.) Robert Wiebe (*The Search for Order: 1877-1920*, 1966) made the same point about the Progressives more than fifty years ago, weaving this into an analysis of how a range of urban reformers sought to fashion a new and efficient society in which the search for order often displaced democracy. Postel seems to admire this modernizing, centralizing tendency characteristic of the Grangers as much as did the Knights of Labor and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Did the impulse for concentration at the national level somehow undermine the democratic character of the organizations that championed egalitarianism?

It did, Postel answers, at least insofar as the Patrons of Husbandry (most conspicuously) bent over backward to accommodate southern white supremacists allegedly groaning under the weight of carpetbag Reconstruction. This is one of the great strengths of this book and one of its most important if depressing conclusions: how easily the commitment to an anti-monopoly, egalitarian worldview could be reconciled to the campaign for racial subjugation. Going national, Granger leaders reconciled with white southerners who had only recently been busy tearing the Union apart to defend slavery and then overthrow Republican Reconstruction. In Alabama, “the Grange offered the ‘oppressed’ white planters and farmers a vehicle for toppling the biracial Reconstruction governments and stripping the black people of the South of their newly-won freedom” (p. 86). Launching a spirited critique of monopoly interests, lobbying effectively at the state level for railroad regulation, the Grange simultaneously promoted a political milieu in which “the question of equality had become unmoored from the problems of emancipation and racial injustice” (p. 69). The Grange simultaneously “placed notions of economic equality and fairness at the top of the agenda of post-Civil War reform” while deliberately avoiding the problem of racial injustice (p. 23). Instead, it sought to restore “harmony between the states” by accepting the southern white supremacist version of Reconstruction. Reaching out to women and all farmers on a seemingly equitable basis, the Grange grew to 860,000 by 1875, all the while privileging farm owners over the 20-30 percent of wage-earning workers who now constituted the rank and file of a new rural proletariat.

Contradictions abounded in the movement culture that broke out across Gilded Age America. Led by firebrand Ignatius Donnelly of Populist platform fame, the Anti-Monopoly Party that stemmed from the Grange soon fused with disaffected Liberal Republicans to decry not only the concentration of wealth but the alleged concentration of power in the Republican governments

presiding over the South. Of course, this variation on the Grange message played better in Louisiana, Tennessee, and Mississippi than in Ohio. But Postel’s point stands nevertheless: determined to build a national organization that championed a populist version of equality, the architects of the Grange made sectional reconciliation the sine qua non of organizational effectiveness. Holding its twelfth annual convention in Richmond, Virginia, Grangers were treated to harangues about the horrors of despotic Reconstruction governments led by “fanatical zealots” who violated “the sacred arc of our liberties” (p. 109). The response from Seth Ellis of the Ohio Grange delegation? Warm, conciliatory overtures to southern delegates. Ellis and his associates were at pains to assure their southern white compatriots that they were there on “an errand of peace” in which there were “no animosities to heal” (p. 109). This was a far cry from the irreconcilable conflict of the 1850s, the danger posed by slavery to republican liberties, and the universalizing egalitarianism of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The same contradictions permeated the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the Greenback Party, the National Labor Union, and most conspicuously, the Knights of Labor. Less of a function of national organization than the bureaucratization of labor, the fraternal society that defined itself by its egalitarian ethos steadily abandoned its inclusiveness as it merged with job-conscious trade unionists. Postel highlights the struggles of Welsh and English coal miners in the Knights to prevent eastern European workers from ever diluting their pay scales and craft prerogatives. Postel rightly excoriates the Knights for contributing to the anti-Chinese campaign that broke out in the West. Intimidating and harassing Chinese laborers across the West and up the Pacific Coast, they evidently joined a massacre of Chinese coal miners in Rock Springs, Wyoming, one that left twenty-eight people dead and almost as many missing. “Chinese exclusion mocked the Knights’ egalitarian principles,” the author somberly notes

(p. 234). Like Postel's book on the Populist movement, perhaps the greatest achievement of *Equality: An American Dilemma* is to underline the contradictions and frank hypocrisies that riddled allegedly progressive organizations of the Gilded Age.

Still, African Americans and women from various backgrounds did join the Knights of Labor. Frank Ferrell, a black machinist, believed that the Knights' egalitarian principles should extend to Chinese workers as well. Ferrell belonged to the Knights' New York's District 49, a branch of the organization which, as Postel points out, was led by socialists and radicals. Precisely. It is here that Postel's book could have made a larger contribution than it has. Yes, Terence Powderly's deplorable tour of the South and his capitulation to Jim Crow at the 1889 St. Louis People's Party convention followed the example set by Gilded Age dissidents like William Sylvis, Oliver Kelley, and Frances Willard, each of whom capitulated to racial subjugation while simultaneously espousing egalitarian sentiments. Despite his proclamations of racial equality, Powderly endorsed a "vision of sectional reconciliation that left little room for the equal rights claims" of black southerners (p. 246). Despite their appalling record toward Chinese workers, despite the segregated locals, and despite the willingness of the Knights leadership to appease white supremacists and former secessionists who were busy fashioning the mythology of the Lost Cause, the organizing activity and the egalitarian language of the movement garnered it black working-class support.

Why, then, did they join? Postel argues effectively that the Knights made an effort to organize black coal miners and railroad workers. The prominence of radicals (meaning socialists) in District 49 also had an impact. But the example of this militant minority in New York—but also elsewhere, including Birmingham, Alabama—resonated precisely because the Knights spoke in terms of emancipation from wage slavery. They articulated the

idea that cooperation would liberate workers from a system of class oppression inextricably linked to racial dominance. They put these principles into action by building cooperatives and dynamic local assemblies throughout the South and advancing the idea that another world was indeed possible. African Americans joined the organization for these reasons, but through political self-determination, they became the leading edge of the movement in the South.

The Knights did more than champion equality within the prevailing system, one which Postel is reluctant to name. The author speaks of an "American system of racial caste" that involved "an extraordinarily pervasive set of hierarchical relationships that the Knights could not and did not transcend" (p. 251). As historian Alex Gourevitch (*From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century*, 2015) has convincingly argued, however, the Knights specifically targeted the wage system as a uniquely oppressive and dehumanizing arrangement that deprived working-class Americans of their very freedom. The Knights echoed the egalitarian themes of the era, but they promoted a vision of working-class solidarity that pointed toward the transformation of a capitalist society. That African American and white members of the movement failed to transcend the racial inequalities deliberately fostered to maintain class discipline should disappoint and discomfit, but not surprise. It would take more than a wave of strikes in the Louisiana sugar cane fields (which led to the bloody Thibodaux massacre of 1886) or a Populist-Republican fusion government in North Carolina to overthrow the wage system. After all, it took a civil war to overthrow slavery.

Naming that system is critical, then, since it moves us beyond contemporary tropes about income inequality that fail to address the structural reasons why it is so difficult to achieve genuine equality under capitalism. Recent studies by historians such as Sven Beckert and Edward Baptist

have left little doubt about the relationship between slavery and the rise of industrial capitalism (even though debate continues to rage about whether capitalist labor relations were intrinsic to the system of slave labor). In his iconoclastic *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), W. E. B. Du Bois was certainly under no illusions about the class struggle that pitted a black proletariat against a capitalist ownership class which straddled regional boundaries. Northern and southern capitalists steadily gained economic and political power in the postwar period, espousing a united worldview that reinforced their class authority. Illuminating the link between this class power and the dominant ideology of social Darwinism is critical to understanding why the egalitarian impulse dissipated in the postwar period. Steve Fraser's *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* (2015) places the question of capitalist power front and center, arguing that Gilded Age protest aimed at contesting the essential foundations of a society predicated on class exploitation and wage dependency. Downplaying the political economy of capitalism, Postel presents "an American dilemma" strangely disconnected from its material and relational foundations. No doubt, as the author writes in the conclusion, "the lines of inequality have been sharply drawn" in contemporary America (p. 317). More than likely, Postel is correct in concluding that the remedy will be found in "collective efforts" and multiracial, cross-gender struggle (p. 318). But the problem confronting average Americans from across the racial and gender spectrum is but a variation on the problem that confronted nineteenth-century American workers. As labor activist George McNeil wrote in 1887, "the laborer who is forced to sell his day's labor to-day, or starve tomorrow, is not in equitable relations with the employer." [1] Solving this American dilemma may be the defining problem of our era.

Note

[1]. George McNeil, *The Labor Movement: The Problem of Today* (The M. W. Hazen Co., 1891), 454.

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