

Reinventing "The People": The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism

John D. Buenker

University of Wisconsin-Parkside

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2007 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Buenker, John D. "Reinventing "The People": The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism." *The Annals of Iowa* 66 (2007), 98-100.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1099>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

The author's exhaustive analysis of admirers' letters to Bryan contributes to our understanding of midwestern history generally. The letters from the region demonstrate that Bryan's personal appeal extended far beyond the states he carried when running for president, that is, the states of the "Solid South," the central plains, and the Rocky Mountain West. Party ties evidently proved too strong to challenge Republican dominance in the region effectively. Kazin suggests as much when he notes that Bryan's advocacy of free trade may have cost him the support of wage earners who depended on jobs in midwestern industries that enjoyed Republican-sponsored tariff protection.

The strongest features of this biography are the fluency of its writing and Kazin's empathy toward his subject. The book reads well. It weaves discussions of historiography throughout the narrative, familiarizing nonspecialists with many of the key arguments about Bryan, Populism, and Progressivism. It also narrates vividly such potentially dull topics as the platform debates at the Democratic conventions.

"As a secular liberal," Kazin confesses to "a certain ambivalence about both Bryan and his many admirers" (xx). Nevertheless, he succeeds admirably at avoiding condescension. For instance, in his discussion of Bryan's campaign against the teaching of evolution, Kazin transcends the caricatures of Bryan as the example *par excellence* of religious bigotry and opposition to "progress." He points out that opposition to evolution was informed in part by revulsion at the use of pseudo-Darwinian theories to justify such invasive practices as compulsory sterilization. In Kazin's view, "Bryan was a great Christian liberal" (305), and political activists ignore at their peril his qualities of "sincerity, warmth, and passion for a better world" (306).

Reinventing "The People": The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism, by Shelton Stromquist. The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006. x, 289 pp. Notes, index. \$50.00 cloth, \$22.00 paper.

Reviewer John D. Buenker is professor emeritus of history at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. He is the author or editor of seven books and some three dozen articles and essays on the Progressive Era, including *The Encyclopedia of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*.

In this thoroughly documented and tightly argued volume, Shelton Stromquist expounds a provocative new synthesis of the Progressive Era, based on three interrelated propositions. First, while acknowledging the complexity, diversity, and internal contradictions of the era's

reformist impulse, he nevertheless posits the existence of a "Progressive Movement" to be an "inescapable conclusion." Second, that movement's central principle was a conviction that class consciousness, especially among the working class, was the greatest threat to the imagined civic community inhabited by "The People." Implicitly, at least, the movement's proponents feared a "revolution from below" more than they did a possible "revolution from above" by the rich and powerful. Third, in ignoring the reality of class, and by marginalizing African Americans and recent immigrants, progressives convinced themselves that socioeconomic inequalities could best be "ameliorated" through voluntary action and enlightened government social policy. This circumscribed view not only severely limited the scope and effectiveness of progressive reforms, but also laid the foundation for the inability of twentieth-century liberals to see the world in class terms.

Stromquist bases his case for the creation of a progressive movement out of disparate organizations and individuals on far more concrete and specific evidence than anyone else has ever mustered. He details numerous examples of overlapping memberships in reform organizations and of multiple memberships by individual reformers. He cites a variety of instances in which specific progressive reforms were supported by a coalition of groups and organizations, often out of seemingly incompatible motives. He demonstrates how several special events, such as the annual meetings of the National Conference on Charities and Corrections, the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the nominating convention of the Progressive Party, elicited a temporary united front among reformers of all types. Above all, he insists, "Progressivism spawned a new language of reform" that interpreted all issues as struggles between "'the people' and 'the interests'" (3).

Stromquist does concede that the Progressive movement was divided into "wings." Its dominant "core" consisted of intellectuals, professionals, and activists who sought to humanize the new industrial order without destroying its essentials, to purge the political system, and to subsume class differences. Arrayed against them was a radical wing composed of urban and rural populists, proponents of municipal ownership, socialists, and an increasingly vocal cadre of "labor progressives" who aimed to restructure the socioeconomic order through the mobilization of working-class power. Between these two poles lay a far smaller group of reformers, whose ideology and methods of operation fluctuated between these two wings. As a result, "the reform impulse found itself continually absorbed, reshaped, and redirected as crises came and went" (9).

In Stromquist's formulation, the Progressive Era began in the 1890s in reaction to unprecedented working-class militancy and ended over two decades later for much the same reason. While many saw repression as the only protection against working-class uprisings, a new generation of reformers sought to remedy the conditions that spawned such discontent. Although their efforts produced an impressive outpouring of "reforms," their impact was limited because they sought to enhance individual opportunity, to "ameliorate" rather than restructure, and to "purify" democracy rather than expand it. This consensus was increasingly challenged by an influential minority of labor progressives, who joined with organized labor to demand "industrial democracy." That split was exacerbated by the struggle for control of the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, by labor's gains during World War I, and by the ruthless suppression of "radicals" during the Red Scare of 1919.

In his all too brief discussion of "The Legacies of Progressive Reform," Stromquist argues that the Progressive Era experience has caused present-day liberals to deny the existence of class differences and to continue to sponsor reforms in the name of "The People," even as the gap between social classes continues to widen. Rightly or wrongly, liberals have preferred to cast social conflict primarily in terms of race and ethnicity. Ironically, the subject of class in today's political discourse surfaces mainly when conservatives accuse liberals of fomenting "class warfare." When that happens, Stromquist contends, "Liberals stood about dazed and confused, uncertain whether they too must now abandon the idea of class conciliation for a new politics of class" (203).

Even those who do not agree that the existence of a coherent progressive movement is an "inescapable conclusion" will find *Reinventing "The People"* to be one of the most comprehensive and thought-provoking syntheses to date on the rise and fall of progressive reform.

In Rare Form: A Pictorial History of Baseball Evangelist Billy Sunday, by W. A. Firstenberger. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005. xiii, 154 pp. Illustrations, bibliographical references, appendixes, index. \$19.95 paper.

The Sawdust Trail: Billy Sunday in His Own Words, by William A. "Billy" Sunday. A Bur Oak Book. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005. xxv, 86 pp. Illustrations. \$15.95 paper.

Reviewer Kathryn Lofton is assistant professor of American studies and religious studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. She is working on a book