

Farmers in Rebellion: the Rise and Fall of the Southern Farmers Alliance and the People's Party in Texas

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1921 (1973). Salvatore is critical of Berger's petulance, ego, and determination to dominate both the party and Debs, although he does not spare Debs for his failure to force confrontation. He attributes this failure to Debs's fear that the more intellectual Berger might humiliate him in debate; this is not the only occasion on which the author finds Debs's leadership less than decisive.

Salvatore's overall analysis is sympathetic to the Socialist leader. Debs's native heritage, simplicity, and belief in the dignity of all men enabled him to interpret socialism in American terms: that in the dream society with political and economic equality, all might share his essentially classless vision. His interpretation would not be enough, for socialism seemed alien to too many Americans and other political traditions were too deeply rooted for him to wean many away from them. Even to working-class Americans, socialism was an unAmerican, European import.

Debs would prick the marrow of those who sought an answer to society's woes through a form of Socialist humanism. While the immediate gains of Debs's socialism may have been meager, author Salvatore feels something new may spring from the ashes—perhaps that potential in our society in which Debs believed and for which he suffered. Certainly, victims of oppression, injustice, and poverty could still find inspiration in the words Debs uttered prior to his sentencing in 1918:

While there is a lower class, I am in it;

While there is a criminal element, I am of it;

While there is a soul in prison, I am not free (295).

Nick Salvatore has combined scholarship with lively prose and probing insight to capture the passion, the weaknesses, the indecisiveness, but above all the dignity and humanity of an American radical who endeavored to show that "citizen" and "Socialist" might be synonymous.

BUENA VISTA COLLEGE

WILLIAM CUMBERLAND

Farmers in Rebellion: The Rise and Fall of the Southern Farmers Alliance and the People's Party in Texas, by Donna A. Barnes. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984. x, 266 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$22.50 cloth.

A combination of sociology and history, *Farmers in Rebellion* represents an effort to demonstrate, as the author declares, that "sociological theory . . . serve[s] to inform the historian about key questions which must be addressed if an event or phenomenon is to be adequately understood" (19). Certainly the goal of interdisciplinary exchange is laudible

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and the results can be both interesting and informative. There is no guarantee, however, that history written by a sociologist will inevitably be significant, any more than there is a guarantee that history written by an historian will be significant. Even our most dedicated labors sometimes produce results which add little to the realm of knowledge, and, sad to say, *Farmers in Rebellion* is a case in point.

Donna Barnes examines the discontent among American farmers during the late nineteenth century in terms of two theoretical sociological perspectives. The first of these is the structural-strain perspective which depicts protest movements as by-products of strain which results from disruptive social change. The most important early advocate of this approach was Emile Durkheim, who viewed modern society as an organic whole in which the various interrelated sectors function according to shared values. During periods of rapid social change, strains may develop within this system and may produce protest and conflict. According to Barnes, the works of such writers as John D. Hicks and Richard Hofstadter are based implicitly on the structural-strain perspective. These historians explained the farmers' revolt as a result of status anxiety and foiled expectations, and their works have received considerable attention, but Barnes regards their interpretations as inadequate because they reflect a one-dimensional approach to the problem.

The second theory is the mobilization perspective: the sources of social conflict are in the inherent stratification of society. No strain is needed to cause discontent or protest because the potential for class conflict is built into the system. Just as Durkheim was parent to the structural-strain perspective, Karl Marx was parent to the mobilization perspective. For Barnes the latter is implicit in the work of such historians as Lawrence Goodwyn and Michael Schwartz and she believes it the most appropriate theoretical approach to an explanation of the farmers' revolt. She also believes, however, that no historian has exploited mobilization theory sufficiently to produce a definitive interpretation of the rise and fall of that movement.

In her own analysis of the history of the farmers' revolt in Texas—which she builds on a framework of sociological theory emphasizing several variations of mobilization perspective—Barnes argues that the movement began in a time of great hardship for many farmers, the causes of which were traceable to the nature of capitalism. Farmers attempted to improve their lot by resorting to economic strategies, such as cooperative marketing, which would free them from dependence on other groups. When these measures did not produce satisfactory results, farmers shifted to political action and formed the People's party,

hoping to force consideration of such radical policy alternatives as the subtreasury plan and the free coinage of silver.

The People's party was virtually doomed to failure because the political power of an aggrieved population is severely limited in a "winner-takes-all" electoral system. Thus the shift to apolitical strategy was naive. Moreover, the subtreasury plan and the demand for the free and unlimited coinage of silver were also naive because, regardless of their alleged inherent virtues, they threatened the well-being of various powerful interest groups who were bound to react negatively. Between 1892 and 1896 the subtreasury idea faded because it was too radical for many politicians, bankers, and commodity speculators, while the Democratic party, with the connivance of Populist fusionists more interested in electoral success than their own organization overtook the free coinage plan. The movement declined rapidly after 1896 because of internal organizational and philosophical conflict coupled with intense external pressures from the established political parties.

Barnes's claim that sociological theory uncovers heretofore invisible key issues is not substantiated in her work. Her book, although it is interesting, adds little to the body of knowledge concerning the Farmers' Alliance and the Peoples' party in Texas which historians using more traditional methods have already compiled. This is not to say, however, that the body of knowledge is complete; many gaps remain. Further research in county and local records, for example, might produce a clearer picture of those who joined the protest movement along with their changing attitudes and motivations during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. This study, which relies almost entirely upon newspapers and secondary sources, offers nothing of that sort. The best that can be said for it is that by calling attention to the shortcomings in the work of several historians (even though failing to adequately redress them) it re-emphasizes that the farmers' revolt is still a fruitful area for historical research.

MIDWESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY

KENNETH E. HENDRICKSON, JR.

The Wool-Hat Boys: Georgia's Populist Party, by Barton C. Shaw. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984. 237 pp. Map, bibliography, index. \$22.50 cloth.

The Wool-Hat Boys is a well-written and crisp narrative of Georgia populism from the 1880s until its tortured demise around 1910. It attempts to fill a serious void in our political history. Not since C. Vann Woodward's *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (1938) has there been such a complete overview of this troubled period in Georgia politics. Barton

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