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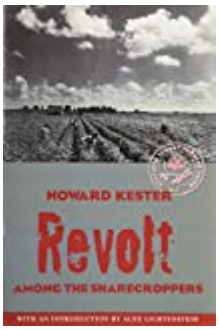

Howard Kester. *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997. 168 pp. $14.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87049-975-3.

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Revolt Among the Sharecroppers is useful as a primary source for both teaching and research. Accordingly, this review examines the text both as a teaching tool and as a history of a critical social movement of the 1930s, a period of dominant government intervention and a time of rural studies research emphasizing the needs and exploitation of the poor.

Originally published as a pamphlet in 1936 by Howard Kester, *Revolt Among The Sharecroppers* was reprinted in 1969 by Arno Press in their American Negro Series. By 1970 the book was out of print and remained unavailable until 1997, when Alex Lichtenstein, seeing its value in the classroom, succeeded in having it reissued. *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* has many advantages. Short and compelling, it is a dramatic first-person story of the impact of the Great Depression and the New Deal on rural life and labor in the South.

The reissuing of *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* has restored one of the most important social and political documents of the early twentieth century. Lichtenstein write that not only does such a book help students grasp the significance of social movements, it appeals to all Americans who object to the "current widening gap between rich and poor and yearn for a more just political economy." Using numerous examples to illustrate social and political injustices against the poor as well as the resiliency of the human's spirit, Lichtenstein masterfully demonstrates how the text can help students identify different experiences and expressions. *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* is "a prophetic plea for interracial brotherhood." As a primary source, it speaks to all those who await full racial justice.

Lichtenstien and Kester bring the participants to life, providing students and general readers with a sense of time, place, and purpose. *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* leads us to identify with the struggles of poor whites and blacks. As a commentary on the New Deal, it gives a concise critique of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration's deleterious effects on tenants and sharecroppers, a tragedy with which all students should become familiar. More importantly, students will be led to think critically about how our society continues to oppress the poor and to pay close attention to ways oppressors maintain and reinforce their own power. As Kester argues, "The well-to-do planters and ruling class generally kept the poor whites too busy fighting the Negro to ask the one basic question: who put the Negroes on our necks? The obvious answer was the planters, landlords, merchant princes, businessmen and all the others who derived a benefit from the struggle the Black and white workers

were carrying on between themselves."

While providing students and general readers with thought provoking documentation on the plight of the poor, Lichtenstien, through Kester's voice and writing, has also provided historians and social scientists with a desperately needed primary source on the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) and its interracial organizing among the rural and agricultural poor of the South.

For scholars, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* offers detailed descriptions of the problems associated with race and class discrimination during the first half of the twentieth century. It analyzes the development of the STFU in the context of the sharecropping system in the Arkansas Delta and the rural South in general and why it ultimately failed to fulfill Kester's vision of a ruling working proletariat. Confident of the skill of ordinary people, Lichtenstein explains why Kester believed sharecroppers could transform the conditions of their own lives into social and political power. Here the author's essay and Kester's voice remind us that great movements for social change evolve in the least expected places and that they are always the forerunners to even greater movements.

The sharecroppers' story, as Lichtenstein and Kester point out, is an American tale that should not be limited to students and scholars. General readers will find not just a documentation of the victimizers but an account of how victims combined religion and politics to produce a social gospel encouraging the proletariat to fight back. Kester is a key figure not only in the events of the time, but in Lichenstein's development of his theory of rural protest.

The 1997 publication of *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* consists of Lichtenstein's introduction followed by the text as it was published in 1936. The introduction, a topical and thematic guide to the text, presents Kester as a humanitarian who has been given a social and religious mission from God to organize sharecroppers' struggle against domination. This format adds Lichtenstein as a third person alongside Kester's first person account. As interpreted by Lichtenstein and Kester, it becomes obvious that the radical socialism of the sharecroppers was historically significant. Kester's story of the sharecroppers' union in the Arkansas Delta spans the period from 1934 to 1936.

Officially created in 1934, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union had as its mission the eradication of social, economic, and political exploitation of the poor. With encouragement from the Communist and Socialist Parties and the NAACP, the STFU worked to end lynching, to promote civil rights for African Americans and economic rights for all sharecroppers, and to build labor unions for miners and textile workers. In the end, three conflicts, as Kester's account shows, caused problems for the STFU: 1) tension over racial integration, 2) bitter factional fighting within and among communists and socialists interested in organizing agricultural workers, and 3) the fateful decision to join forces with the national labor movement to build industrial unions. The final demise of this organization, however, occurred with the migration of blacks from the fields in the 1930s. Notwithstanding this loss, black sharecroppers, like white sharecroppers before them, began to make decisions in their own best interest.

In his examination of social gospel radicalism during the Depression, Lichtenstein provides four interpretative perspectives that will help readers understand the role Kester played in politicizing poor whites and blacks. Discussing Kester in the context of religious radicalism, grassroots socialism, interracialism, and unionism, Lichtenstien shows how Kester's position on integration and unionism were both beneficial and detrimental to the STFU. Unionism depended on interracialism to function: Whites and blacks needed each other. There was strength in numbers, but southern societal norms made unity difficult. Traditional racial attitudes and norms infiltrated the movement, causing white sharecroppers to seek their separate advancement.

The second half of *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, Kester's own story, has six chapters. Chapter One, "Manhunt," describes attempts by landlords and plantation bosses to intimidate organizers. Kester describes the life-threatening danger of the protest. Having defied the danger, Kester wrote that justice "was the one thing worth living for [because] it was the hope of the people, of all the enslaved sharecroppers everywhere in the South."

Chapter Two, "The Heritage of the Sharecropper," illustrates why poor black and white farmers were willing to risk their lives to overthrow oppression. Sharecropping led nowhere: "the sharecropper of today is no more literate, no more wealthy, no more cultured, no more privileged than was his grandfather of fifty years ago." Obviously, as Kester argued, "there have been enormous profits in cotton, yet the tenant farmers' share has been so small that he must struggle desperately to keep body and soul together. Hope, ambition, and incentive have through the years been killed in those who till the soil."

Chapter Three, "The Sharecropper," the most pro-

found of the book, explains what it meant to be a sharecropper and the conditions that shaped the social and political consciousness of the southern rural poor. Focusing on the plantation bell as a symbol of class and race oppression, Kester shows how the tolling of the bell represented powerlessness among the poor: "The tone which the bell gives out may inspire the stranger in the cotton country toward reverential thinking for somehow a ringing bell reminds one of God and cathedrals and a man's eternal quest for truth and justice." This bell, on the other hand, represented poor diet, health, housing, no clothes, education, or decent drinking water. The bell toll meant that life was sub-par, without protection for oneself or one's children. The plantation bell evoked the community struggle to keep a church going; it signaled the economic exploitation of the entire community; for a black woman, the bell meant not having enough time to care for her family and to rear her children. "I have seen a two-weeks' old baby wrapped in quilts and laid in a furrow while the mother worked the cotton," Kester explained. "I have seen mothers ready for child birth," he continued, "still in the fields pulling at the soft white fiber." The bell proclaimed the legal authority that landlords and planters had to rob the poor, paradoxically seen as lazy, shiftless, and ignorant.

Chapter Four, "The Sharecropper Rises," is an excellent discussion of the conditions that inevitably give rise to protest. Seventy years of struggle against a condition bordering on slavery had gotten the worker nowhere. Decades of poverty had not only intensified the prevailing misery common to the masses of sharecroppers, both black and white, but had also witnessed the gradual accumulation of bitterness and despair. No one struggles against wrongs unless first convinced that these wrongs are not ordained by God and are neither inevitable nor necessary to human existence. The AAA policies of the federal government intensified the already deepening misery of the southern sharecropper and acted as a climax to the long and bitter struggle waged against poverty, disease, ignorance, and semi slavery.

"Arkansas Hurricane," Chapter five of Kester's story, is a continuing account of underclass nonviolent resistance. Sharecroppers' modest demands were viewed as threatening: "We propose a model contract providing the following: Adequate cash furnished during the farming season at a legal rate of interest, with privileges of trading where we please. Pay at prevailing wages for all improvements made on the property of the owner. Decent houses for each family, with use of certain portion of the land rent-free, for the purpose of growing food-stuffs for our families and live stock. Access to woodlands to secure fuel for our use and a wagon and team to haul it with. For the right to sell our cotton at market prices and to whom we please." Sharecroppers saw this struggle as a righteous crusade for freedom and justice; planters saw disrespect. Living off the backs of the workers, their primary objective became destruction of the movement.

The final chapter in Kester's book is "The Disinherited Face the Future." Here Kester attempts to state what should happen with the tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and day laborers in the face of mechanization of cotton picking and the decline of cotton prices on the world market. Recognizing that the mechanical cotton picker had induced migration among poor field workers and joblessness among those who stayed behind, Kester offers the reader a workable, if idealistic, vision: "The only sane road for men to follow is that one which leads toward an economy of abundance… Only men of great courage, social consciousness, world kinship and prophetic imagination will dare travel this road and seize the abundant life. The timid and unimaginative will want to live and die by their fathers."

Revolt Among the Sharecroppers masterfully illustrates the vision and strength of the disinherited. Sharecroppers had done what the politicians in Washington refused to do–stand up against the plantation bosses. This experience taught poor Black and white a valuable lesson which only they realized: "They had grown in numbers, they have grown in ideas and they have grown in power. They know that poverty and misery and ignorance and all the hellish evils of King Cotton's Kingdom are not ordained of God. They know that they can change things when the slaves of King Cotton set their hearts against the tyranny and terror of the cotton country. They know that they must build a mighty union that will sweep into hell the system that holds them in bondage. They know that the Galilean carpenter talked about the Kingdom of God on earth and they know that they alone can make his vision of brotherhood and justice a reality in this world."

Revolt Among the Sharecroppers is a story of progress and pain. Progress is evident in that race discrimination, largely sustained through deliberately keeping the poor among both races destitute, had created a need to work together to overthrow the ruling class, the planters. Destitution created such political and social consciousness that even "the planters were afraid of the union because white and black slaves had joined together to struggle against their common enemy." Sharecroppers emerged from sweat, tears, and years of toiling and formed a rad-

ical organization, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. Finally, however, the movement ebbed and the planter aristocracy was again able to perpetuate pain by redirecting the grievances onto the black masses, making them the scapegoats for the South's sin.

The republication of this book makes it accessible to students, scholars, and readers interested in social radicalism, agrarianism, religion and politics. It would be be even stronger had Lichtenstien included some of his students' responses in his introductory remarks. Since the students were the primary reason he campaigned to have the book reissued, comments concerning what guided students' thinking would have been useful. The kinds of questions Lichtenstein asks students to consider before reading the book would also be useful.

Readers might profit from further introductory probing. For example, where is women's voice? Where are the middle class families that supported the movement? Exploration of this kind is critical for the development of analytical thinking in undergraduates.

Revolt Among the Sharecroppers would have been even stronger had Kester integrated the voices of sharecroppers and other sharecropping organizations in his story. Readers and students would be interested in his relationship with other group organizers. Providing readers with details concerning similarities and differences among sharecroppers' organizations throughout the South would help them understand why the sharecroppers' voice was so threatening to that the planters that it had to be eliminated.

Despite these minor concerns, this book is heartily recommended to scholars and students. It is a remarkable documentation of twentieth-century southern agrarianism as demonstrated by a group who united to create a social vision that championed their cause. It should be read along with *Tobacco Road*, *The Plight of the Sharecropper*, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, *All of God's Danger*, and *This Little Light of Mine*.

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