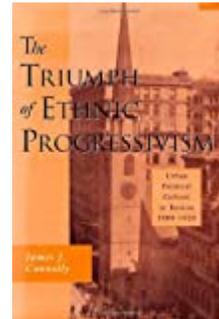


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**James J. Connolly.** *The Triumph of Ethnic Progressivism: Urban Political Culture in Boston, 1900-1925.* Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998. xii + 260 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-90950-2.



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Early in *The Triumph of Ethnic Progressivism: Urban Political Culture in Boston, 1900-1925*, James J. Connolly promises a revised understanding of Boston's political history. Not the least of Connolly's challenges to conventional wisdom is his portrayal of James Michael Curley, long considered the prototypical machine politician in twentieth-century New England, as instead a leading architect of urban progressivism. This provocative reinterpretation of the structures and styles of urban politics advances a number of similarly counterintuitive arguments and, in the end, largely succeeds. Connolly maps out a new Progressive Boston and defines anew the political struggles and social transformations of the era.

Centering on Irish politics in the Hub, this narrative takes on a century of historical writing about urban machines and progressive reformers. Connolly, an Assistant Professor of History at Ball State University rejects the idea that Progressives shared any core ideology or even any set of public policies; rather, he locates various Progressivisms, all sharing a "common rhetorical formula": pitting the people against the interests (p. 3). By the first decade of the twentieth century, we find Democratic politicians like John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald and Curley articulating a new, distinctly ethnic form of Progressivism. Connolly grounds his retelling of urban political history upon an intensive exploration of the metropoli-

tan press, a theoretically sophisticated analysis of voting patterns, and a critical engagement with a number of historiographical debates.

Connolly invokes the recent studies of Terrence J. McDonald and Philip J. Ethington[1] when calling for a "political history of social relations" (p. 14). Against the traditional view that timeless ethnic tensions have driven the city's politics since the first antebellum wave of Irish immigration, this study counters that it was precisely in the early years of the twentieth century that Boston witnessed the emergence of a contentious politics of ethnicity. Further, these Progressive-Era ethnic resentments were themselves largely the products of changes in the world of politics.

This reconceptualization of the origins of ethnicity goes hand in hand with Connolly's rejection of the "simplistic dualism" between machine politician and middle-class reformer (p. 6). At this point, some readers might question whether we need yet another historian exploding the machine/reformer dichotomy. Such skeptics will find this work original and ultimately persuasive, thanks to Connolly's extensive discussion of neighborhood politics in Progressive-era Boston. Chapter Four, "The New Urban Political Terrain," is an exemplary study of grassroots politics in the American city. In the process, Connolly is able to call into question a good deal of received

wisdom about the grassroots. On the ground in the complicated urban spaces of Brighton, Charlestown, and the West End, we find a different Progressive city, one transformed by the institutional political changes of the first decade of the twentieth century. Local elites were able to gain greater control over time as ward politicking gave way to carefully orchestrated town meetings and non-partisan community improvement associations.

Connolly's fine-grained portrait of Boston speaks to larger national developments by connecting the city's ethnic neighborhoods to the politics of charter revision. This exploration of the fight for charter reform in 1909 brings the political world of the Progressive era to life. The process of rewriting the city's charter turns out to have transformed numerous aspects of urban life: ethnic identities, class relations, the very language of public culture. Connolly weaves together partisan rhetoric and public policy. While alert to the charismatic personalities of "Honey Fitz" and Curley, he clearly explains the larger structural shifts in 1909 Boston. Connolly's discussion of the 1909 Charter clinches his case for the importance of political transformations in understanding Boston's history straight into the 1920s.

As Connolly proves his case for the post-1909 period, the argument is ultimately less persuasive as to how Boston arrived at charter reform. To begin with, the world of late-nineteenth-century Boston comes across as a bit too "peaceful" (p. 15). Pre-1900 Bostonians' sense of their city doesn't quite ring true in light of the numerous national urban crises of the late Gilded Age. When Connolly moves on to the decade leading up to 1909, he surprisingly falls back upon social explanations for the early rise of Progressive reform. The opening call for a "political history of social relations" seems temporarily forgotten as Connolly relies upon conventional explanations of the rise of an urban middle class and the emergence of new immigrant communities.

In fact, one reads Connolly's work on the emergence of Progressivism and is struck by the class basis of much of his evidence. Reformers often identified themselves as taxpayers as much as citizens. Immigrants were as ready to employ languages of workers' rights as they were to appeal to ethnicity. Connolly privileges ethnicity "over class" when discussing an attack in Fitzgerald's newspaper, *The Republic* (p. 102). The column's precise language of "class dominance" of "multi-millionaires" over "the self-respecting wage-earner" points, at the very least, to more interesting connections between ethnicity and class in Progressive Boston than Connolly's overall ar-

gument is willing to admit. Much of Connolly's evidence suggests that a large part of this history was a story of the American middle and working classes undergoing a politically-driven process of reformation.

While Connolly's privileging of ethnicity over class needs further clarification, he also neglects to explore fully the relationship between Boston and national political development. Early on, Connolly explains the relative harmony of late-nineteenth-century Boston by pointing to alliances between Boston's Irish Democrats and "nationally-connected Yankee Democrats" (p. 28). This intriguing formulation never returns again; the reader is left to wonder how demographic changes in the Democratic Party's national leadership between 1900 and 1925 affected the emergence of ethnic Progressivism. Similarly, Connolly is insistent in rejecting the "urban liberalism" thesis, yet he never provides a convincing replacement.<sup>[2]</sup> The narrative stops short of pushing James Michael Curley's ethnic Progressive vision beyond the 1920s. Connolly's epilogue skips quickly to late-twentieth-century urban politics, leaving the reader to ponder how this argument fits into the emergence of the New Deal order in the next decade.

This important book's title promises us a narrative of "triumph"; at one point, Connolly strangely informs his readers that "one must ... embrace" Progressivism's "multifaceted character" (p. 40). In the end, however, a different, more nuanced tone is struck throughout this challenging history. The unintended consequences of business class reform emerge as partisan politicians mastered the language of the people against the interests. James Michael Curley popularized ethnic progressivism, a political style which carried him to power but which certainly narrowed the terms of public debate. Connolly's argument suggests that the "rhetorical facade" (p. 75) of Progressivism possessed near-universal attraction but ironically came back to haunt all who employed it.

Notes:

[1]. Terrence J. McDonald, *The Parameters of Urban Fiscal Policy: Socioeconomic Change and Political Culture in San Francisco, 1860-1906* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Philip J. Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[2]. J. Joseph Hutchmacher, "Urban Liberalism and the Age of Reform," *Journal of American History* 49 (1962): 31-41; John D. Buenker, *Urban Liberalism and Progressive*

*Reform* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1973). For an essential study of another way of thinking about urban liberalism in the British context, see Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge, Eng-

land: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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