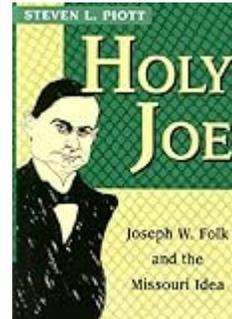


Steven L. Piott. *Holy Joe: Joseph W. Folk and the Missouri Idea.* Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998. xi + 208 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1130-9.



Reviewed by James J. Connolly (History Department, Ball State University)

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The Reformer as Moralist: Joseph Folk and Progressivism

Political biographies usually follow one of two paths. Some concentrate on the inner world of their subject and its relationship to his or her public actions. Others trace a public career and attempt to place it in a broader context. Sources often dictate the choice. Many important figures left few clues to their private life, forcing historians to rely on the press and other sources to piece together a biography. Steven L. Piott's *Holy Joe: Joseph W. Folk and the Missouri Idea* takes this second course. The result is a more complex treatment of Folk than historians have previously offered but one which needs to provide more of the intellectual and political milieu that this sort of biography requires.

Piott's argues that a full account of Folk's career reminds us of the moral intensity of Progressivism, an aspect often neglected in standard treatments of reform activism during the early twentieth century. Folk, a St. Louis circuit attorney who gained fame when muck-raker Lincoln Steffens featured his crusade against political graft in *The Shame of the Cities*, brought a distinctive moral outlook to his public career. As circuit attorney and later as Missouri Governor, he campaigned

vigorously to improve the moral condition of public life, a predilection that earned him the nickname "Holy Joe" from both his admirers and his critics. He labeled his reform vision "the Missouri idea"—the contention that the conduct of public office must be above reproach and that official wrongdoers must be exposed and punished to the fullest extent of the law. The evangelical fervor with which he promoted this ideal earned him a national following. But as Piott notes, this approach also alienated many Missouri Democrats and ultimately undermined his political career. Folk's story, in Piott's hands, thus becomes a case study in both the significance and the limits of morally driven reform during the Progressive era.

Piott sees the key to understanding Folk's politics in his upbringing. Born in rural Tennessee in 1869, Folk was raised in a staunch Baptist household. The moral rigor of his early life "created a frame of reference" for Folk, one that powerfully shaped his public character (p. 2). He was also a striver, apparently anxious to escape the bounds of small town life. He went to Vanderbilt law school, and after a brief stint as a small town lawyer and politician, Folk moved to St. Louis in 1893. It was this

complex mix of smalltown moral righteousness and ambition that would characterize Folk's political career and which Piott captures very effectively.

The changing public mood in late nineteenth-century St. Louis suited an aspiring politician such as Folk. The city was growing rapidly, and corruption infused its public life. Democratic boss Edward Butler dominated local affairs, managing a system of public franchise distribution based on bribery. But by the late 1890s, public dissatisfaction with the state of local affairs began to grow, setting the stage for Folk's emergence. He first gained notice for engineering a temporary settlement of a local street-car strike, which prompted local Democratic leaders to nominate him for circuit attorney in 1901. They expected Folk to provide a respectable public front for the party while remaining pliable behind the scenes. But Folk refused to cooperate. When a notice of another bribery scheme reached the local press, he investigated, which led him to the first of a series of corruption prosecutions that would catapult Folk into the national spotlight.

The timing of Folk's crusade helped make him a famous reformer. Just as he reached the peak of his campaign, with several successful cases under his belt, Lincoln Steffens came to St. Louis. The muckraker sought stories for *McClure's Magazine* and selected Folk's anti-corruption campaign to launch his series of exposes of city politics. The young circuit attorney quickly became the leading example of what Steffens called "civic patriotism." He used this newfound status as a springboard to the Missouri Governorship, making "the Missouri idea" the basis of his campaign and working with Steffens (who helped write some of his speeches) to promote the idea of virtuous politics. By the time he entered the Governor's office in 1904, Folk's name had become a virtual synonym for honesty in public life.

Piott's account of the remainder of Folk's career, which was characterized largely by a series of close defeats and near misses, highlights the limitations of a politics of morality. Although as Governor Folk broadened his reform agenda to include a more expansive regulatory role for state government, greater emphasis on social legislation, and support for antitrust measures, his political persona remained largely linked to moral reform. His campaign to enforce blue laws strictly and to clamp down on illegal gambling overshadowed his other concerns and reinforced his reputation as a puritanical politician. Unwillingness to spare fellow Democrats from charges of corruption also alienated him from party officials. All of this would deny Folk needed support in his bid for the

1908 Democratic endorsement to the U.S. Senate (Missouri had a nonbinding preference primary by this time). Although mentioned as a possible presidential nominee in 1912, his absence from office ultimately cost him support. A second try for the Senate in 1918, after several years working in the Wilson administration, ended in defeat as well.

This study of Folk's rise and decline proves especially valuable as a corrective to past caricatures that depicted him as merely an intolerant moralist or an opportunist. *Holy Joe* is attuned to the limits and difficulties of Folk's fervent moralism but also credits him with ethical sincerity and with broadening his reform goals as his political career developed. Piott is able to draw a more three-dimensional picture of Folk largely through the artful use of the comments of contemporary observers, including both supporters and enemies. This strategy allows him to get around the absence of sources yielding Folk's private thinking on various matters. It also underscores the ambitious, calculating nature of Folk's political character, a trait many of his opponents emphasized and to which Piott remains constantly alert. The result is a more realistic view of Folk, one that lends credence to Piott's concluding argument that Folk "added texture, impetus, and moral tone to Progressivism" (p. 191).

Despite these successes, Piott's biography struggles to place Folk in context. Apparently lacking access to the private Folk, Piott needs to ground the public man more concretely in the political ideas of turn-of-the-century America. But he does not take sufficient stock of recent scholarship defining the origins and character of Progressivism. Folk's "Missouri idea" certainly bore the stamp of his evangelical upbringing, but the notion that public office was a public trust that transcended party loyalty was hardly a new one. The ideas of Folk and Lincoln Steffens, who did so much to promote both Folk and the idea of virtuous politics, owe some of their popular resonance to the rhetorical traditions of classical republicanism. When Folk, borrowing from Steffens, attacked bribegivers and takers as "enemies of the Republic" and warned that "when legislation becomes a commodity the liberties of the people will be lost," or when he decried "the mania for speculation," his language drew on the deep anticommmercial current of American political culture (p. 72). Although attuned to the religious character of Folk's reformism, Piott fails to recognize this important dimension. And while he regularly links Folk to Progressivism, he never precisely defines this slippery term or engages the debates about its shape and significance. Thus Piott overreaches when he concludes, in the words

of a contemporary observer, that Folk's "revolutioniz[ed] ... the political thought of this country with respect to official life and official duty" (p. 191). The absence of a sustained analysis of turn-of-the-century political thought makes such a claim unpersuasive.[1]

Piott might also have considered more carefully the changes in politics underway at this time. He makes less of Folk's willingness to buck party dictates than he might. One of the hallmarks of Progressive reform politics was the use of publicity to appeal directly for popular support, bypassing party organizations. Folk appears to be acutely conscious of the importance of this strategy, and his career might well provide a useful measure of the development of this new political style. His success resulted largely from his ability to reach voters without the support of the Missouri Democratic machine, and his demise can be traced in part to the persistent power of party organizations in the state. While Piott's narrative illustrates these developments, it does not overtly analyze them, thus missing an opportunity to explore another aspect of Folk and the political world in which he operated.

Nevertheless Piott delivers a useful biography of an intriguing, important politician. It is no easy task to convey a sense of a public figure without access to private documents, yet Piott succeeds admirably on this score. "Holy Joe" was a more complex and significant reformer than most accounts have allowed, as Piott's engaging account amply demonstrates.

Note

[1]. Two essays that offer starting points for explaining the origins and character of Progressivism, neither of which are cited by Piott, are Richard L. McCormick, "The Discovery that Business Corrupts Politics," in Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 311-56 and Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982): 1131-32.

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