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Bernard Hirschhorn. *Democracy Reformed. Richard Spencer Childs and His Fight for Better Government.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997. xvii + 233 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-30144-5.



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In 1927, Richard S. Childs, who engaged in seven decades of municipal government reform, defined a reformer as “one who sets forth cheerfully toward sure defeat.” Over the course of time, Childs noted, reforms become accepted and others take the credit. “The original reformer is lost in the shuffle then, but he doesn’t care.” Childs’s words are quoted in the front of this study which is dedicated to his memory, and set the tone for the book. Bernard Hirschhorn attempts to give due credit to Childs through an account of his lengthy career.

The book evolved from a Columbia dissertation topic originally suggested in the 1970s by Kenneth Jackson. Hirschhorn has since engaged in teaching at Bernard Baruch College and several public high schools in New York City. Richard Spencer Childs, who was born in 1881, represented to the author, a living link with the Progressive Era at the beginning of the twentieth century. Childs died in 1978 and Hirschhorn determined to draw attention to his spectacularly long career as a reformer.

It was not, however, a strikingly successful career. Hirschhorn acknowledges that Childs’s life-long struggle to get his fellow Americans to accept the principle of the short ballot was a “middling success at best” (p. xxiii). On the other hand, Child’s advocacy of the city-manager plan of government, was more fruitful. Childs also achieved some success in his crusades for ap-

pointed rather than elected judges and for professional, appointed medical examiners rather than elected coroners. Despite these modest successes, the sheer length of time that Childs fought his battles—from collaborating with Woodrow Wilson before World War One until well into the 1970s—is striking and makes him worth some consideration.

Hirschhorn wrote ten chapters detailing Childs’s career in political reform plus an opening and closing chapter presenting some information about the subject’s personal life. The substantive chapters are organized around political reforms that engaged Childs’s attention. Although he pursued a business career, Childs’s heart was in his reform work. He was a dedicated propagandist who never held elective office but worked with numerous reform associations and New York City charter commissions to persuade legislative leaders and the public of the correctness of his prescriptions for improving representative democracy.

Rejecting the Jacksonian democratic notion that expanding the number of elective offices should be the norm in government; Childs argued that long ballots with numerous positions to be filled posed a danger to democracy. The long ballot inevitably meant that voters were ignorant of the true character of the candidates and usually could not even recognize most of the names

they were asked to consider. As a result, voters chose candidates based on political party affiliation and political machines controlled cities. According to Hirschhorn, Childs's opinion of "the intelligence and morality of the American electorate was high" (p. 30) but "he questioned nevertheless the intelligence of the vote" of even the "enlightened citizens" who were his neighbors (in the most independent assembly district in Brooklyn and New York State).

Childs's preferred alternative, the short ballot, would thrust responsibility on the few elected officials who would then appoint the personnel to administer the government. This would, Childs believed, bring about more responsibility in government and stem the corruption so evident in his time.

Childs formed a Preliminary Short Ballot Organization in 1908 and secured support from such noted figures as the historian Charles Beard, Harvard president Charles W. Eliot, and Princeton president Woodrow Wilson. In 1909 Wilson assumed the presidency of the national organization which Childs's father bankrolled (at the rate of \$10,000 for ten years). Childs spearheaded a publicity campaign for the short ballot, placing advertising in magazines, and planting articles in newspapers. Despite Wilson's titular leadership role in the movement, Childs won Theodore Roosevelt's support for the short ballot campaign and the Progressive Party adopted the short ballot plank in 1912. Despite such support, the movement flickered out of life during World War One. The campaign was folded into the National Municipal Reform League's operations in 1919 and produced very little in direct results.

A more successful and enduring crusade by Childs was for the city-manager plan of government. He preferred to call it the council-manager plan and felt that he had fathered this reform scheme. Staunton, Virginia adopted a form of government with a "general manager" in 1908 and the commission plan of government is traced back to Galveston, Texas in 1901. Childs married the two ideas and advocated the scheme that a small elected legislative body should appoint a professional manager.

The council-manager or city-manager plan "just grew like Topsy," during the second decade of the twentieth century, which was "exactly what Childs wanted" (p. 72). Childs's claim that he cared little for receiving credit (quoted in the beginning of the book and in this review) was surely tested. Childs was so successful in maintaining anonymous paternity that when the first convention of city-managers met in 1914 they didn't even know who he was. His request to attend the meeting was rebuffed

by a curt, "Sorry the managers don't want any outsiders attending our meeting, only professionals." (p. 82) Later, when city-managers did become acquainted with Childs they derided him "for being an impractical theorist" (p. 83).

This relationship with city-managers evidences the problems that Child faced or created throughout his lengthy career. He was essentially a publicist working through reform organizations. He had limited experience in actual political work. He served on an Alfred E. Smith Commission of charter revision in the 1930s but the commission lost credibility after Smith resigned and Childs took over the lead. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia informed Childs of the futility of continuing the commission and convened another group, the Thacher Commission, which accomplished its task. Hirschhorn tells us that the Thacher Commission "was supported by Childs" (p. 107).

This sort of support is hard to measure in terms of effectiveness. Childs may have played a prominent role in advocating judicial elections, county and state reorganization, and professionalization of the post of coroner, but he was never a key player in achieving substantial reform.

Sadly, Childs seems to have ended up out of touch with contemporary life. In his last years he was profoundly alienated from the National Municipal League that was such an important part of his life. After retiring from business in 1945 he devoted himself full-time to the league as a volunteer. He clearly had been a significant part of the league's work throughout the century but when Childs wanted the organization to publish yet another of his calls to reform he was humiliated. A league official pointed out the obvious truth that (in 1977) "the council-manager plan could no longer be marketed as a novel commodity, as it had been in the Progressive years" (p. 196). Childs published his book privately and it was the predicted failure in terms of sales as well as sense.

There is no doubt that a remarkably strong faith inspired Childs to keep fighting for a better society for a period lasting seven decades, but I suspect that most scholars would expect more from this book than what is offered. Although Hirschhorn sees the book as an attempt "to examine the whole landscape of his reform interests in the context of burgeoning cities, urbanism, and the political reform movement," (p. xxi) readers learn very little other than what Childs did, what he wrote, and how he failed to persuade others.

The book's argument rests almost exclusively on Childs's personal papers. Most chapters are based entirely on Childs's own writings and correspondence—they literally have no other references. We get few alternative opinions or perspectives. John Porter East's *Council-Manager Government: The Political Thought of Its Founder, Richard S. Childs* (University of North Carolina Press, 1965) is cited in the bibliographical essay at the end of the book but apparently was not consulted or used in writing this account.

By paying no attention to scholarly understanding of the issues involved in Progressive era reform or the context of urban politics, the argument and import of

this book are substantially weakened. By failing to place Childs adequately in the context of his times Hirschhorn does little to advance the reformer's reputation. By ignoring contemporary scholarship he does little to further our understanding of these reforms. The organization and writing also tend to obscure rather than illuminate. Childs clearly had an impact on the author and others, but this book doesn't explain it.

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