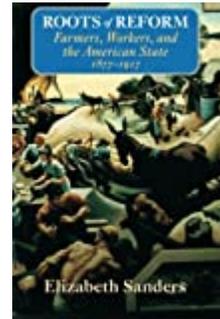


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth Sanders. *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State 1877-1917.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. x + 532 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-73476-7; \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-73477-4.



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Published on EH.Net (April, 2000)

Since the publication in 1963 of Gabriel Kolko's *The Triumph of Conservatism*, scholars have been highly suspicious of American progressivism. Working from a 'corporate liberalism' perspective, Kolko, James Weinstein, Martin Sklar, James Livingston, and others have interpreted Progressive Era reforms, such as railroad regulation, anti-trust, the Federal Reserve system, and workers' compensation, as products of nefarious capitalist campaigns. In this story, the new, giant corporations used 'reform' programs to control markets, reduce competition, and replace worker militancy with complacency. This puts studies of the early American welfare state in sharp contrast with comparable studies for Canada and Europe. There, a social democratic coalition linking militant labor with agrarian radicals is credited with pushing state programs regulating labor and product markets over the objections of capitalists. Such grass-roots radical groups disappear from corporate liberal studies of the American Progressive Era, replaced by ingenious and scheming corporate capitalists. Early welfare-state programs in Canada and Europe, are signs of the growth in power of a nascent working class. In the United States, by contrast, they are viewed as signs of the emergence of a modern ruling capitalist class.

It may be that the welfare state began to look more attractive to American scholars after it began to be dis-

mantled. Or perhaps its undoing in an era of weak unions and triumphant corporate capitalism encouraged scholars to reexamine labor and capital's role in the creation of the welfare state. Discounting the impact of corporate capitalists, Theda Skocpol, for example, uses state-centered and maternalist models to attribute early welfare-state initiatives in the United States to a coalition uniting women's groups with professional reformers. Others have applied society-centered and social-democratic models to the United States, including political scientist Richard Valelly, and labor historians Julie Greene and Richard Schneirov. They have shown the extent of political action by Progressive Era labor and radical farmers, and the impact of their militancy on both the national and local politics.

Enter Elizabeth Sanders. Rejecting corporate liberalism, she argues that Progressive-era reforms were championed by a reform coalition uniting organized labor, middle-class reformers, and radical farmers. More, Sanders rejects both the state-centered approach associated with Skocpol and labor historians' social-democratic approach to argue that the real driving force behind the early welfare state in the United States came from the country side, from politically mobilized farmers in the South and West. Dismissing progressive intellectuals as too isolated and organized labor as too weak and disor-

ganized, Sanders argues “that agrarian movements constituted the most important political force driving the development of the American national state in the first half century before World War I. And by shaping the form of early regulatory legislation and establishing the centrality of the farmer-labor alliance to progressive reform and the Democratic Party, the agrarian influence was felt for years thereafter” (p. 1).

Sanders supports this strong statement by examining roll-call votes in Congress on several major Progressive-Era laws. Using county-level data on manufacturing value added per capita in 1919, she divides the United States into three regional blocks. These include a “core” of highly industrialized localities, mostly in the Northeast, a “periphery” in the South and West, and “diverse” localities mostly in the Midwest and along the border of the other two. Examining votes on such measures as extending ICC jurisdiction, the Clayton Act, the Underwood Tariff, the income tax, the Federal Reserve Act, and vocational training, she shows how congressmen from the periphery, favored an ‘agrarian statist agenda’ of state regulation and intervention meant to redistribute wealth and power towards farmers, wage laborers, and residents of the periphery. Their agenda was enacted when senators and representatives from the periphery joined with allies from diverse localities, generally progressive Republican insurgents, and a few core Democrats closely allied with labor unions. By contrast, this reform agenda was vigorously opposed by core Republicans associated with major corporations and industrial and financial capital. In this way, Sanders argues, the alliance of farmers and organized labor in the American Progressive Era resembled the farmer-labor alliances behind social democratic reforms and the early welfare state in Scandinavia and elsewhere described in the works of Gosta Esping-Andersen, Leo Loubere and Seymour Martin Lipset.

Sanders’s work is a major contribution to our understanding of politics in the Progressive Era. By restoring ‘farmer’ to the ‘farmer-labor’ coalition, she moves scholarship back to an earlier appreciation of the role of agrarians in American radicalism, providing background, for example, to the role agrarian radicals like Iowa’s Henry Wallace and Minnesota’s Floyd Olson played in building the New Deal coalition of the 1930s. Showing how, even before the New Deal, Democrats united northern labor with peripheral agrarians to advance economic reforms, she broadens our understanding of the role of the Democratic Party in American politics. United by more than racism, the Democrats were a party of reform committed

to advancing an agrarian statist agenda.

Thus Sanders provides new insight into the regional and industrial sources of political parties’ economic programs. But the parties themselves are a weak link in her argument. Slavery, the Civil War, and segregation made regions almost synonymous with political party in the United States. In the Progressive Era, almost all southern congressmen were Democrats, but Republicans controlled most congressional seats from the Northeast. Sanders’s regional division between ‘core’ and ‘periphery,’ therefore, confounds party and region, separating ‘core’ Republicans and ‘peripheral’ Democrats. Sanders supports her argument with two-way tables showing support for various progressive reforms by representatives or senators by region. But she rarely distinguishes between voting by party in each region and never performs the statistical tests needed to determine the relative importance of party and region in congressional voting. But it is clear in her tables that there is a strong partisan component to congressional voting. In the final vote on the Payne-Aldrich Tariff of 1909, for example, 80% of representatives from the core supported passage compared with only 33% of those from the periphery (p. 225). However, the vote was even more partisan than it was regional: 98% of Democrats opposed the tariff bill against 99% of Republicans. Did peripheral representatives oppose the bill because they were from the periphery or because they were Democrats? The same question can be asked for other partisan measures. The Federal Reserve Act, for example, was supported by 100% of Senate Democrats against 90% of Republicans (p. 252). A measure in 1910 forbidding the use of Justice Department funds to prosecute unions under the antitrust laws was supported by 98% of House Democrats but was opposed by 74% of Republicans (p. 343). Sanders chooses to emphasize the strong regional alignment in all of these votes; she may as well have seen them as partisan votes driven by the imperatives of political coalition building in an era of strong parties.

In addition, there may also be problems in Sanders’s regional classification by manufacturing output per capita in 1919. Are all manufacturing regions the same? Is it appropriate to place declining New England textile counties in the same category as Pennsylvania steel towns and Washington State canning communities? And is it appropriate to put Southern cotton regions dominated by racism and sharecropping in the same peripheral category as western mining communities, Minnesota dairy towns, and wheat farmers on the Great Plains? Sanders could do a finer breakdown and then provide sta-

tistical tests for using a higher level of aggregation. This would be a great deal of work; but that may explain why God made graduate students.

Elizabeth Sanders is well aware of the partisanship and regional subtleties behind the progressive era legislation she discusses. Beyond the statistical analysis, she shows a firm understanding of the qualitative literature, the congressional debates and the maneuvering among the leadership of Congress and the Executive Branch. *Roots of Reform* is a work of the highest scholarship, pro-

viding an insightful account of the origins of the American welfare state. Whether one agrees or disagrees with her findings, Sanders's work marks a new beginning in the study of twentieth-century American politics.

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Citation: Gerald Friedman. Review of Sanders, Elizabeth, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State 1877-1917*. EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. April, 2000.

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