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James Duane Bolin. *Bossism and Reform in a Southern City: Lexington, Kentucky 1880-1940.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000. x + 156 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2150-5.

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James Duane Bolin's new book, *Bossism and Reform in a Southern City: Lexington, Kentucky, 1880-1940*, is set in a time when bossism was a major issue in American life. During the Gilded Age, Democratic presidential candidates Samuel Tilden and Grover Cleveland both gained national prominence by attacking boss rule in New York. In 1939 F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover claimed bossism far more dangerous to American institutions than communism.

Bosses had been around since Revolutionary times, when Samuel Adams established a political organization in Boston. Aaron Burr founded Tammany Hall in New York City. In the pre-Civil War period, bosses in growing cities, such as Chicago, brought competing interests together to support funding citywide internal improvements. In the Gilded Age, sensational exposes of civic corruption in large cities focused national attention on the alleged evils of bossism. William Marcy Tweed, convicted for massive stealing from public coffers in New York City, mirrored the image of a boss as an overweight, jowly, cigar-smoking oaf.

In 1902 Lincoln Steffens, *Shame of the Cities*, chronicled the chicanery of boss politics in several major cities, including St. Louis and Minneapolis. Bosses persisted, continuing to fill a need, handing out welfare, and building a community consensus. Several big city bosses of the Great Depression, Frank Hague of Jersey City, James Michael Curley of Boston, Edward J. Kelly of Chicago, Thomas J., Pendergast of Kansas City, and Edward Crump of Memphis, exercised great power inside the national Democratic party. These men led large organizations in a time when election campaigns required large numbers of patronage workers.

To most bosses, local affairs were more important than national affairs. " What's government for if it isn't to help people," Pendergast said in 1933. "They're interested only in local conditions – not about the tariff or the war debts. They've got their own problems. They want consideration for their troubles in their house, across the street or around the corner – paving, a water main, police protection, consideration for a complaint about taxes." On another occasion, Pendergast commented: "I'm not bragging when I say I run the show in Kansas City. I am the boss. If I were a Republican they would call me a leader." In other words, one person's boss was another person's leader. The word "boss" could apply to untold thousands of Americans, those who held public office or those who made policy in other ways.

There is a significant body of scholarly literature on bosses and their machines. An older standard account, Harold Zink's, *City Bosses in the United States: A Study of Twenty Municipal Bosses* (1930), viewed bossism in the

dark terms of Steffens. The image of bosses had started to soften, when Seymour Mandlebaum, in *Boss Tweed's New York* (1965) argued that bosses considered all levels of society to form policy. *The Pendergast Machine* (1968), by Lyle W. Dorsett, stressed the positive role of Pendergast in developing a successful welfare system. Zane Miller, *Boss Cox's Cincinnati: Urban Politics in the Progressive Era* (1968), showed how a Republican boss constructed a solid middle-class base. In 1976 an influential book of readings, *The City Boss in America: An Interpretive Reader*, edited by Alexander Callow, brought together studies of urban bosses, showing how attitudes about machine politics shifted over the years from negative to positive.

Recent reassessments of bossism include Roger Biles, *Richard J. Daley: Politics, Race, and the Governing of Chicago* (1995), and Lawrence H. Larsen and Nancy J. Hulston, *Pendergast!* (1997). A scholarly paper of importance, M. Craig Brown and Charles N. Halaby, "Functional Sociology, Urban History, and the Urban Political Machine: The Outlines of and Foundations of Machine Politics, 1870-1945," indicated a need for comparative works on bossism, a difficult task at best, as broad as American politics. First and foremost, bosses require consideration on their own merits, time, and place. Beyond generalities, comparisons are artificial and speculative. This situation is handled very well by Bolin in his study, which considers bossism and its consequences in Lexington, a medium sized city that grew moderately and steadily from 16,656 people in 1880 to 49,304 in 1940.

Founded in the early days of Kentucky settlement, Lexington had close to 2,000 inhabitants in 1800 and many of the amenities and urban services associated with a much larger community. Temporarily, it was the biggest city in the Ohio River Valley. Lexington was not on navigable water and with the advent of the steamboat age on the Ohio River, the city faced the distinct possibility of losing its early importance. The coming of the railroad in the 1830s brought a round of prosperity and by the Civil War, Lexington had 9,521 residents, many of whom were slaves. After hostilities, Lexington leaders embraced the philosophy of the New South, placing an emphasis on commercial progress and white supremacy. While African Americans could vote, most lived in poverty, a circumstance that prevailed until well into the twentieth century.

In the 1880s, Dennis Mulligan, a member of the Lexington city council, dominated politics. He garnered the support of conservative business interests. Despite an image of a gentile old southern town held back by an agrarian past, Lexington was a modern commercial and industrial town, a success of the New South philosophy. Mulligan successfully blocked almost every civic betterment project that required higher taxes. He had a reputation as an obstructionist self-serving boss. According to Bolin, "Mulligan viewed politics not as a way of bringing progress to the city of Lexington but as a means of bettering his own lot" (p.20). By the time of Mulligan's death in 1901, his politics of opposition had cost him much of his support. An obvious need for new programs to modernize Lexington created a situation made to order for the emergence of a new reform boss, a role that William Frederick "Billy" Klair filled.

Klair, born in Lexington in 1875, came to the attention of local politicians when as a youth he sold newspapers on a downtown street corner. At age fifteen, he became a page in the Kentucky General Assembly, rising to the post of sergeant-at-arms. Klair showed a flair for politics. A quick learner, he studied and grasped the fundamentals of the legislative process, even helping to draft an important bill. In 1899 he ran from a Lexington district and won a seat in the lower house of the general assembly, holding it for the next ten years. He became an insider and legislative leader. In 1911 he gained election to the state railroad commission, failing to win a second term. In 1917 he returned to the lower house for one term. For the rest of his career, he used Lexington as a base, continuing to play a major role in state politics, gaining entry into the "Big Six," a group of leaders who dominated statewide Democratic politics.

Klair, a towering figure in Lexington, ran the city through a combine of different interests. His machine had widespread support in all parts of town, with the notable exception of the African American community. Despite Klair's efforts to court blacks, they bucked national trends and voted Republican. Klair believed in white supremacy. Klair used traditional boss methods to stay in power, handing out turkeys at Thanksgiving and filling potholes. He allowed a vice district, which had its origins early in the nineteenth century, to flourish. In general, he ran a peaceful and well-ordered town. Unlike Mulligan, he promoted civic improvement projects, improving and extending the streetcar lines.

On the state level, he strongly supported bluegrass farmers and the powerful Kentucky Jockey Club. A special interest of Klair's was the University of Kentucky, located in Lexington. He made sure the institution had a favorable image in the General Assembly, resulting in new buildings and increased appropriations. He used

his position at the state level to help his growing Lexington business interests. His insurance agency carried most of the state's insurance, and his publishing company printed text books required in Kentucky schools. During the Great Depression, he worked hard and successfully to obtain New Deal money for Lexington. He was a great believer in using patronage to advance his fortunes.

At the height of Klair's power, he looked the very image of a Kentucky colonel. Short of stature and a little overweight, he dressed well and carried a cane. Throughout his adult life, he enjoyed evenings playing small stakes poker and sipping good Kentucky whiskey with his political cronies. His wife was the daughter of a prominent Lexington merchant. He lived in a large and impressive house. A devout Roman Catholic, he regularly attended mass. By the time of his death from heart trouble in 1937, he was a respected and beloved figure in Lexington and throughout Kentucky.

He was a courtly and courteous boss, a southern gentleman rather than a crude and coarse political thug. Klair was a classic example that bosses came in all shapes and forms. While Klair was not adverse to using his connections to make money, he was not overly greedily. According to Bolin, "Klair's life and career illustrated yet another reward, more important to the boss than economic gain....Ultimately, the reward sought by the entrepreneur was not a monetary one. The ultimate reward was power. Billy Klair was an entrepreneurial power broker" (p.155).

Bolin's well-organized and easy-to-read book, based on extensive research in primary sources, is an important contribution to the study of bossism and to Kentucky history.

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