

The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865–1914. *By Nancy Cohen.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 318 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, illustrations. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$22.50. ISBN: cloth 0-807-82670-7; paper 0-807-85354-2.

Reviewed by Heather Cox Richardson

With *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism*, Nancy Cohen joins the cadre of historians who deny that there was an abrupt break between the concerns of the post–Civil War era and those of the early twentieth century. Setting out to uncover the roots of modern liberalism, Cohen believes she found them in the thought of late-nineteenth-century economists and social scientists. Liberal thinkers of the first postwar generation, like E. L. Godkin and George William Curtis, faced squarely the implications of the postwar expansion of democracy to include workers and people of color. Quickly, they began to fear that the poor would threaten private property and individual liberty, key tenets of liberalism, by demanding cooperative action and redistribution of wealth. In response, Cohen argues, liberal reformers denigrated political self-rule and elevated the idea of the “economic man” who strove to succeed in the marketplace; they clung to the idea of laissez-faire government; and they abandoned equal citizenship and embraced racism. Their plan was to “limit and constrain the power of propertyless majorities in a polity that had recently erected universal male suffrage as its cardinal political ideal” (p. 220).

The second generation of liberal reformers, Cohen explains, men like Henry Carter Adams and Richard T. Ely, became professional social scientists, called themselves socialists, and challenged the liberalism and individualism of their predecessors. In a bitter struggle in the 1880s, the upstarts were deliberately stifled by their elders, who withheld jobs and patronage until the younger men recanted their support for cooperative economics. When the social scientists were reincorporated into the liberal fold, though, the two generations found common ground in new ideas about the role of the state in society. They developed the idea that a true liberal state could only be achieved with the creation of a system of regulatory bodies, which would generally protect competition and free contract even as they admitted the death of the autonomous individual. This new system, they believed, would offer individuals greater opportunity to fulfill their desires through consumption rather than through the old system of economic independence. Thus, Cohen argues, liberal intellectuals in America created the idea of the modern liberal state decades before it was justified by corporate capitalism. The “new liberalism,” she says, rendered “the dominance of corporate capital compatible with American democracy” (p. 15).

Knowing the final shape of modern liberalism, Cohen's story was clear. She focused her research on the editors, writers, economists, social scientists, and other public figures, whom she calls liberal intellectuals, crediting them alone with reworking American liberal political ideology. These men shared a "cohesive group culture," she says, and "wielded a very large share of . . . cultural and political influence," being "able to frame the terms of political debate, determine the issues, and establish the values to which others had to conform," despite the fact that they were a "tiny minority of Americans." Liberal reformers were not, generally, effective politicians, and Cohen downplays their political bumbling by declaring that "they always believed that their most enduring work would be cultural—the tutoring of public opinion" (pp. 12–13). These are large statements and hard to prove, except by arguing that their ideas did, ultimately, survive. It is worth asking, though, whether the liberal reformers were the important part of the equation or simply the articulators of some other process.

Cohen's reliance on theoretical writings to discover historical change is problematic. Postwar intellectuals certainly developed theories about the economy and the postwar state, but is it reasonable to believe they did so in a vacuum? It is surprising, for example, to find the arguments of *Nation* editor E. L. Godkin and radical labor theorist Wendell Phillips joined together to reveal a developing theoretical critique of liberalism when the two men were bitter political enemies. More important, Cohen relies heavily on the incorrect idea, taken from reformers' theoretical writings, that early postwar thinkers supported a laissez-faire government. In fact, many defended the idea of laissez-faire at the same time that they advocated government programs—tariffs, for instance, or specific monetary plans—to encourage individual enterprise by developing business. A reliance on their theoretical writings misses their quite important distinction between different kinds of government activism.

The Reconstruction of American Liberalism is strongest when it undertakes to explain the thought of the second generation of postwar economic thinkers like Richard T. Ely and John Bates Clark. These men are little known today, but they offered the intellectual justification for late-nineteenth-century popular demands for government protection of special interests. Cohen's explanation of their intellectual development and professional debate rounds out what we know about the ideas of the protesters themselves.

Cohen has correctly identified the key question of the Reconstruction era, during which the suffrage became more open than ever before just as industrial consolidation created vast extremes of wealth. In such circumstances, how, people wondered, could democracy coexist with the protection of private property? There was a dramatic change in the relation between democracy, economy, and the state in the late nineteenth century, and intellectuals certainly

helped to justify and negotiate the changes around them. That they alone drove such a dramatic reworking of American society, though, seems unlikely.

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