

The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon. By Robert D. Johnston. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. xxiii + 394 pp. Photographs, illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$35. ISBN 0-691-09668-6.

Reviewed by Nancy Cohen

Robert D. Johnston's *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* is at once a probing study of key episodes in the history of progressivism in one city and, more ambitiously, an engaging reinterpretation of the nature and values of the American middle class. Johnston seeks nothing less than to force historians and social scientists to reconsider the fundamental salience of middle-class identification in American political history, and, in so doing, to recover a radical, democratic, anticapitalist middle-class tradition that can guide us in our own time. Johnston was awarded the 2002 President's Book Award of the Social Science History Association for this work.

The Radical Middle Class revises our understanding of the Progressive Era's direct democracy movement in Portland, and its social basis. Johnston argues, against prevailing historiographic opinion, that class conflict propelled the politics of progressivism in this city with a "cozy, 'bourgeois' reputation," and that the class-conscious warriors there were middle-class men and women (p. xiv). Analyzing census data from 1900 to 1930 and precinct-level election data, Johnston presents "a dramatic reconceptualization of Portland's political economy" (p. 73). Business historians will be particularly interested in Johnston's analysis of the strength and vibrancy of small-scale enterprise in the city through the 1920s, the distinctive nature of Portland's small-scale manufacturing, and the divisions between Portland's anticorporate small-business owners and the city's corporate-identified local bourgeoisie.

Johnston builds his case from studies of four Portland progressives and several episodes of political contest during the Progressive Era. This is a finely nuanced and rich analysis of local politics that provocatively engages the perennial—and still important—question of the nature of progressivism. Johnston challenges many prevailing

interpretations of progressivism. Antivaccinationism, for example, reveals the populist resistance of middle-class Portlanders to the interference of experts and the ideology of efficiency. The Single Tax and other initiatives likewise demonstrated that the direct democracy movement was neither antidemocratic nor “merely political.” Rather, “the populist vision of direct democracy included a very concrete dream of a petit bourgeois economic utopia” (p. 115).

The chapters on Portland’s middle-class progressives are the springboard for a more ambitious—but also less successfully realized—project. The heart (in both senses of the word) of Johnston’s work is a politicophilosophical reflection on the true nature and character of the American middle classes and the democratic potential that lies within them. Johnston argues passionately that the values and beliefs of the middle classes have been consistently misrepresented by scholars and cultural observers of American life, and he does not hesitate to attribute this to elitist bias. The verve of *The Radical Middle Class* derives from Johnston’s self-professed identification with this democratic middle-class tradition and the specifics of Portland reform itself.

The central new claim advanced by Johnston is that the middle class throughout U.S. history has been, or has had the potential to be, radically democratic and anticapitalist. My remarks are addressed to two of the larger issues raised by this thesis.

Much of Johnston’s case for the significance of a middle-class anticapitalist, democratic tradition in U.S. history depends on how one defines the middle class, but the book falls short in this critical task. In a deeply researched discussion of the theoretical debates and historiographic studies on class, Johnston proposes an “antidefinition” of the middle class, the hallmark of which is a social constructivist or idealist definition of class (p. 12). Nevertheless, there is a pervasive slippage in his uses and definition of class. At times, class is grounded in an objective or materialist basis, as in Chapter Four on the political economy of Portland. At other times, Johnston asserts that “fluidity” between the working class and the lower middle class is what matters (p. 49). In still others, ideological or cultural affinity appears to be the standard for assigning class position, irrespective of strong objective evidence to the contrary. This argument has a somewhat tautological quality: those expressing

the democratic, anticapitalist sensibility Johnston has identified as the hallmark of the lower middle class are thereby lower middle class.

The problematic treatment of class has ramifications for the book's argument, which locates the impetus for democratic advance in the petty bourgeoisie or lower middle class. Johnston insists, "It is the burden of this book to establish that property ownership, small-proprieted values, and membership in the lower middle class can inspire some of the most expansive democratic thought and political radicalism imaginable" (p. 94). The significance of the book is precisely this revisionist interpretation of the political sensibility of the American middle classes. The most plausible version of these various claims, and the one for which *The Radical Middle Class* lends most support, is that of class fluidity and alliance. Yet it raises a question: If this sensibility emerged from an alliance between the lower middle class and the working class, why give the lower middle class the pride of place? The vision and politics of progressive Portlanders bear a strong resemblance to what many historians have identified as characteristic of working-class republicanism or producerism, Anglo-American skilled-worker trade unionism, and agrarian populism. The importance of Johnston's work is that it forces a reconsideration of the class basis of, and ideological dispositions within, this radical democratic tradition, and all of us who are interested in the question of the relationship between capitalism and democracy would do well to consider this exploration. Johnston should be credited with opening up a new line of inquiry in this important debate. I do not think, however, that he has settled the case.

My second major objection has to do with Johnston's treatment of direct democracy. Johnston, who describes himself as "(within limits) a radical direct democrat" (p. xii), opens his discussion of Portland's direct democracy with a sharp rebuke to the critics of direct democracy. While asserting that the critics have ignored the intentions of direct democracy's architects, he insinuates that the source of their blindness is antidemocratic elitism. (This is a rhetorical strategy used all too frequently in the book.) But Johnston has failed equally to evaluate direct democracy in practice and the implications of this history for its prospects. In the Progressive Era, direct democrats were defeated on precisely those measures that embraced their "utopian democratic

visions” (p. 121), and direct democracy was quickly turned to success by the right—as occurred in the Ku Klux Klan–led triumph of the 1922 School Bill. (It is only fair to observe that Johnston seeks to reinterpret this episode in Part Five of the book. I was not, however, persuaded by his argument.) On the other side of the California recall, bought and paid for by multimillionaires who needed little adroitness to manipulate so flawed a system, those of us who have to live under our new governor’s promise to govern by initiative might be forgiven for being less sanguine about the democratic possibilities of direct democracy in the twenty-first century. I would agree that there is an urgent need in the United States to reinvigorate democratic practices, but I would submit that the arsenal of direct democracy has more frequently damaged the cause. Once democracy’s panacea, direct democracy has proved to be its poison pill.

For raising new interpretations of the social basis of a particular progressive movement and reinvigorating the question of the Progressive stance toward capitalism and democracy, *The Radical Middle Class* merits attention by all students and scholars of the Progressive Era. Admirers and critics alike will acknowledge it as an influential contribution to the historiography of U.S. politics and political economy.

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