

Chicago's Progressive Alliance: Labor and the Bid for Public Streetcars. *By Georg Leidenberger*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006. viii + 202 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-875-80356-3.

Reviewed by Richard R. John

A century ago, Chicagoans engaged in an acrimonious, protracted, and richly documented debate over the future of the city's streetcar network, then the largest in the world. In *Chicago's Progressive Alliance*, Georg Leidenberger makes this debate the centerpiece of a monograph on the relationship between elites, social movements, and public policy. In the six-year period between 1902 and 1907, Leidenberger contends, a coalition of labor unionists and social activists—"Chicago's progressive alliance"—mounted an ultimately unsuccessful crusade to purchase the city's streetcar network and administer it as a public utility. This failed campaign, Leidenberger concludes, demonstrates what one might call, with apologies to the political theorist Eldon J. Eisenach, the lost promise of progressivism.

Leidenberger interprets the municipalization movement through the lens of German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas. According to Habermas, the rationality of public debate—a value Habermas much prized—is inevitably compromised when organized groups enter the fray. For Leidenberger, the municipalization movement demonstrates that certain organized groups—e.g., labor unions—could advance the public interest in a rational way while simultaneously hastening a “civic and democratic revitalization” (p. 6). Tragically, at least for Leidenberger, the municipalization movement failed—thwarted, in his view, by a reactionary business elite. As a consequence, Chicagoans were saddled with a streetcar network that, while tightly regulated, remained privately owned. Even more distressingly, the cross-class alliance that had flourished during this “unique moment” became transmogrified into a constellation of merely functional interest groups that lacked the moral authority to sustain the revitalization movement the progressive alliance had inspired (p. 6).

While Leidenberger's engagement with Habermas is stimulating, it is not without its problems. Habermas, after all, is not a student of Chicago politics in the 1900s. On the historians who have written on related topics, Leidenberger has less to say. For example, Leidenberger never effectively critiques Philip J. Ethington's contention that interest-group politics had triumphed in major U. S. cities by 1900, and he does not even acknowledge the existence of the large body of historical writing by economic historians unpersuaded that the municipalization of the Chicago streetcar network would, in practice, have necessarily promoted the public interest. Most surprising of all, Leidenberger declines to take on Daniel T. Rodgers, whose enormously influential *Atlantic Crossings*, which Leidenberger duly cites in his bibliography, includes an extremely perceptive chapter on U.S. streetcar politics in the 1900s. By locating the municipalization movement in a transnational frame, Rodgers reaches a very different conclusion about its character and significance.

Further questions are raised by Leidenberger's own analysis of the municipalization movement. Though his focus is quite narrow—a single public-policy controversy involving one business in one city during a six-year interval—he says relatively little about three major protagonists: namely, streetcar-industry leaders, newspaper publishers, and the Chicago city council.

For Chicago's streetcar-industry leaders, the years between 1902 and 1907 were an interregnum between the 1890s, when financier Charles Yerkes abandoned the city after failing to obtain a fifty-year franchise from the Illinois state legislature for his Chicago streetcar empire, and the decade lasting from 1910 to 1920, when electric-power magnate Samuel Insull successfully consolidated the city's various lines into a single more-or-less coherent operating system. Though the intervening period lacked an industry leader as notorious as Yerkes or as visionary as Insull, it would have been useful to know more about how the industry was run, if only to understand better what the municipalizers were up against. Unfortunately, Leidenberger draws on neither the business records of streetcar companies nor the personal papers of their leaders. (In fairness, it is conceivable that these do not exist.) Less excusable is his neglect of the voluminous, and extremely illuminating, trade press. Given these omissions, abundant

room remains for a monographic history of the streetcar business in Chicago during the Progressive Era—a topic that has yet to find its historian.

More puzzling, given Leidenberger's invocation of Habermas's conception of the "public sphere," is his flat and uncritical characterization of the Chicago press. In the 1900s, the two Chicago newspapers to champion municipalization most fervently—namely, the *American* and the *Examiner*—were, as Leidenberger is well aware, owned by and served as personal vehicles for the megalomaniacal newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst. Though Leidenberger concedes that Hearst's endorsement was "crucial" to the municipalization movement (p. 146), he overlooks Hearst's own motives for supporting the cause, a topic David Nasaw explores in detail in *The Chief* (2000), his prize-winning biography of Hearst. It strains credulity to contend, as Leidenberger does, that only after 1907 did Hearst's papers become mired in sensationalism. (After all, the headline "Remember the *Maine!*" was rallying Hearst's readers to war in 1898.) And it smacks of special pleading to praise Hearst for conforming to a Habermasian conception of the public interest when Hearst backed "union-led reform" but to upbraid him for falling short when he did not (p. 147).

Similar caveats are raised by Leidenberger's treatment of Chicago politics. The principal forum for the municipalizers was not, as Leidenberger seems to assume, the mayor's office, but, rather, the city council, an organization rarely hailed as a paragon of disinterested civic virtue, then or now. Under the circumstances, it is easy to understand why many Chicagoans found municipalization a hard sell. How can we, a century later, be so confident that they were wrong?

Enthusiasts for municipal ownership, as well as partisans of organized labor, may well find Leidenberger's account compelling. (Though the latter would be well advised to supplement Leidenberger's highly idealized sketch of Chicago's teamster politics with the decidedly less sentimental—yet, on balance, far more compelling—analysis of the same subject in Andrew Wender Cohen's *Racketeer's Progress*.) Yet, in the end, *Chicago's Progressive Alliance* fails to explain persuasively why the streetcar municipalization movement rose and fell. Like so many recent students of the Progressive Era, Leidenberger is an unabashed admirer of the moral earnestness with which certain Americans championed the public interest a century ago. And this is all to

the good. Unfortunately, he is so intent upon fitting his case study into the procrustean bed of Habermasian social theory that he misses the opportunity to bring it to life.

*Richard R. John is professor of history at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he specializes in the history of business, technology, communications, and political development. Recent publications include the edited collection Ruling Passions: Political Economy in Nineteenth-Century America (2006). He is currently completing a history of early American telecommunications.*