



The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon

Robert D. Johnston

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America has a long tradition of middle-class radicalism, albeit one that intellectual orthodoxy has tended to obscure. *The Radical Middle Class* seeks to uncover the democratic, populist, and even anticapitalist legacy of the middle class. By examining in particular the independent small business sector or petite bourgeoisie, using Progressive Era Portland, Oregon, as a case study, Robert Johnston shows that class still matters in America. But it matters only if the politics and culture of the leading player in affairs of class, the middle class, is dramatically reconceived.

This book is a powerful combination of intellectual, business, labor, medical, and, above all, political history. Its author also humanizes the middle class by describing the lives of four small business owners: Harry Lane, Will Daly, William U'Ren, and Lora Little. Lane was Portland's reform mayor before becoming one of only six senators to vote against U.S. entry into World War I. Daly was Oregon's most prominent labor leader and a onetime Socialist. U'Ren was the national architect of the direct democracy movement. Little was a leading antivaccinationist.

The Radical Middle Class further explores the Portland Ku Klux Klan and concludes with a national overview of the American middle class from the Progressive Era to the present. With its engaging narrative, conceptual richness, and daring argumentation, it will be welcomed by all who understand that reexamining the middle class can yield not only better scholarship but firmer grounds for democratic hope.

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From Reader Review *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* for online ebook

Mr. Monahan says

We have probably all been guilty of referring to the American “Middle Class” during the Progressive Era. This would bother Robert Johnston who sets out to prove that there is really no discernible “American Middle Class.”

In an exhaustively prepared historiographical chapter, Johnston humbles the reader with an analytical synthesis and comprehensive summary of the origins of the ‘middle class’ as a specific terminology. He then proposes revision, rehabilitation, or rethinking the preconceived notions—most of which demonize this group—which have followed this body of American society (from, as Johnston states, yeoman to yuppie). In this section of his work, I took exception to several of the scholarly opinions of the middle class in general, and I must confess I never thought of the middle class as ‘fascist.’ It was also nice to see such familiar names as Gilmore, Jackson-Turner, and Wiebe surface in the historiographical background for this book.

Johnston then quilts together a pretty interesting series of Progressive Era narratives that have a common thread: Portland Oregon. Some of his evidence involves the biographical analysis of four major Progressive figures in Portland’s history. The first bit of evidence Johnston gives us is that of the legal history surrounding *Muller v Oregon*. While the implications of a “middle class” laundry owner taking the issue of working restrictions placed upon women all the way to the Supreme Court certainly comes across as ‘radical’, I felt this was a strangely under researched in comparison to the rest of the book’s contents. The most interesting character in the entire piece is, undoubtedly, Harry Lane. As doctor to the poor, Mayor, and outspoken US Senator, Lane is the strongest radical Johnston finds, and truly supports the book’s thesis. In Will Daly, a labor leader turned printer, the radicalism is that of a member of the “middle class” championing right’s (presumably lower class) of workers. The shortcoming in this evidence is, as Johnston openly admits, the commercial rather than industrial nature of Portland. Perhaps the most original portrayal Johnston gives us here is that of William S. U’Ren—but also that of the reforms associated with direct democracy: initiative, recall, direct primary, direct election of Senators (well before the 17th Amendment), and referendum. U’Ren serves as both a local and national member of Johnston’s radical middle class for his support of direct democracy. Readers who either take such aspects of American government for granted or who appreciate them, might not grasp the radicalism this shift away from representative democracy towards, in Johnston’s words, Populism. Lastly, and most bizarrely, Johnston uses one Lora Little as the representative of a radical stance on public health. In the anti-vaccination movement (as well as the public schooling movement) flaws in Progressive or Populist thought emerge. In short, sometimes the people are wrong!

Johnston’s book has forced me as a student to take a closer look at the reforms of the Progressive movement in a more balanced way. Clearly this is not simply a time period of heroic reform and resistance to a villainous plutocratic class. In fact, Johnston has convinced to re-examine the idea of class in general. He challenges the social scholarship to rethink the ‘class’ question by examining other cities first, and then perhaps rethinking the vague social lines used in contemporary scholarship. I applaud him for this, and hope to see a new trend emerge; a new vocabulary that clarifies the patterns of American behavior in a more specified way than Upper Class, Middle Class, and Lower Class. After all, doesn’t it seem that everyone is Middle Class as it is?

Lance says

A really combative book that is fun to read, but he leaves religion out of the discussion.

nada says

The Marxist author does not hide his bias, but I can see that impressive research went into this book. I wish more of it were presented though. Why repeatedly write things like "a mayor" without naming the person specifically?

Johnston also made a strange claim that Henry George's philosophy was forged in the crucible of white nationalism; absolutely no evidence was given and there was no indication of what he might have meant. It is true that George opposed the importation of Chinese slaves, and that George simultaneously expressed disdain for Chinese people and customs, but George wrote that early in life.

Linda says

I might be biased because Robert Johnston was one of my favorite professors at UIC. This book restores hope that democracy can be cool after a malfunction like W getting elected...twice

Kent says

A bit dramatic at times and greatly detailed in Portland politics, this work is meant for scholars of the Progressive Era. However, Johnston's critiques of American historiography regarding ideas of class, the middle class, the working class, and capitalism are strong (even if one begins to wonder if he has a positive thing to say about any previous work as praise is given much less frequently than critique if not complete dismissal). These critiques/discussions of historiography (along with his exceptional notes section) are valuable tools for scholars of the era, labor history, or the history of capitalism. His desire to rethink the middle class and how a "lower middle class" and working class were at the center of progressive reforms in Portland is a powerful inclusion to existing understandings of the era, even if his retelling of events and tries to bring back figures of these events makes for a long and dry read at times.
