

Jim Bissett. *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside* 1904-1920. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), pp 191. \$39.95 ISBN 0-8061-3148-9 hardcover; \$14.95 ISBN 0806134275 paperback

**Contemporary Oklahomans are often surprised** to discover that their state was once one of the most socialist states in the nation. In 1914, Oklahoma voters gave nearly 21 percent of the gubernatorial vote to Fred W. Holt, a socialist candidate, far exceeding those percentages in a number of counties. Roger Mills and Marshall counties, for example, gave Holt 35 and 41 percent respectively. Arrell Gibson defines those 1914 successes as the “high tide” of socialism in Oklahoma, but state voters gave about 16 percent of their votes to Eugene V. Debs in the next presidential election, and the party’s power waned only after its leaders were discredited for “disloyalty” during the First World War. Still, many of the party’s issues were carried on under the structures of the Farmer-Labor reconstruction League in subsequent decades.

Such facts do not seem to square with present perceptions and realities of modern Oklahoma politics. Neither do they fit the models used by social, cultural, or Marxist historians to explain socialism and its historic appeals in the nation at large. Most historians interpret that history in an urban-industrial framework that leaves little room for consideration or appreciation of Oklahoma’s rural and agrarian socialists. Even more problematic for such models, Oklahoma socialists relied heavily upon biblical themes and images to promote their programs.

Jim Bissett discusses these anomalies and others that differentiated Sooner socialism from national and international norms. He argues that the unique characteristics of the Oklahoma Socialist Party were the

product of a fusion which drew upon the experiences of two prior generations in agrarian and political reform and the insights obtained from a party wide dialog. Those principles and practices permitted the redefinition of the doctrinaire socialism that dominated the party elsewhere. In turn, party leaders were free to draw upon the communitarian themes and calls for justice found in the biblical message so familiar to most of their audience. The end result produced a party that had joined three important political and cultural traditions: "(1) the Jeffersonian emphasis on the common man. . .; (2) the scathing indictment of capitalism set down by Karl Marx. . .; and, (3) the evangelical Protestant tradition. . . ."

Bissett's book is well written and deals with a significant and otherwise neglected topic. While focused on Oklahoma, it also casts light on national concerns and interpretive models. I was, however, disturbed by two omissions. First, the absence of any discussion of competing agrarian-rural models in international socialism narrows the value of the study. The lack of attention to Russian Populism is particularly problematic because it developed in the same era as the Oklahoma model. Even more importantly, any understanding of the unique character of Oklahoma socialism has to account for the fact that much of the land the socialists originally sought was Indian land. Surely that variable had some influence on the evolution and acceptance of their arguments.

Some of these omissions may result from the size of the book, 191 pages of text, which obviously limited the range of topics that could be explored. In any case, the book makes a significant contribution to the understanding of Oklahoma politics, offering a solid foundation for any subsequent study of its subject, including the concerns I have identified.

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