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Cohen, Nancy *PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR: The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914*. University of North Carolina Press, \$59.95 ISBN 807826707

A new capitalist order

Russell Baker, the former *New York Times* columnist and memoirist, made a career of blurring the lines between fact and fable, thereby gaining critical acclaim and a popular following. Writing in the April 11, 2002, issue of the *New York Review of Books*, he recited the prevailing account of American politics at the end of the 19th century: Everything in the Republicans' history since the Lincoln assassination thirty-five years before argued that political and financial success depended on giving capitalism unrestricted license to do whatever was necessary to maximize profits.

Although a good storyteller, Baker still has some *Growing Up* to do before he is ready to tackle American history. Contemporary research on Reconstruction and the Gilded Age has yielded complex, sometimes conflicting accounts of the postbellum decades, but which collectively overturn the caricature of corpulent Gilded Age capitalists running their corporations from the White House. More ambitious yet is the interpretation offered in Nancy Cohen's recent work, **The Reconstruction of American Liberalism**. Cohen is not content with redeeming late-19th-century capitalists from their troglodyte reputation; she insists that many of them paired with Progressive social scientists to create a new capitalist order, one in which corporations and the state worked in concert.

Cohen picks up where Eric Foner, in *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (Oxford University Press, ISBN 0195094972, \$17.95, softcover) leaves off. Mid-19th-century Europe was wracked with labor disputes arising from industrialization, but in antebellum America, slavery overshadowed all other labor questions. With the advent of Reconstruction, Radical Republicans were

torn between social reform and economic liberalism, with economic liberals opposing social measures to aid freedmen, for the same reasons that they opposed governmental regulation of northern factories and labor conditions.

At the heart of postbellum politics, Cohen contends, was dispute over the purpose and ends of the Civil War. Was the war undertaken for constitutional reasons, as a millennialist crusade to usher in moral reformation, or to liberate slaves from bondage so that they might contract their own free labor? It is not simply the triumph of American democracy that we rejoice over, but the triumph of democratic principles everywhere, the *Nation* magazine boasted in its July 5, 1865, issue, even if no public consensus then existed about the philosophical content of those democratic principles.

The Reconstruction of American Liberalism recurs to a Hegelian historical framework to explain the eventual resolution of the labor question (which in turn generated the tariff question, the money question, and the trust question). In dense but non-jargoned prose, Cohen argues that contention between two factions within liberalism—the democratic and the libertarian--was transcended only when moderates of both camps decided to join forces, thereby casting out the free market and socialist ideologues. As Cohen puts it: Contrary to the prevailing historiographical interpretation, the protoprogressive social scientists did not overthrow the classical liberals. Rather, after a cultural struggle in the 1880s, liberal reformers and social scientists ended up collaborating with each other to forge a new liberalism. Cohen advances this interpretation through sketches of its participants: *Nation* editor Edwin Godkin is set against fiery abolitionist Wendell Phillips, economist William Graham Sumner is contrasted with social scientist Henry Carter Adams, and so on. Far from being an era of do-nothing complacency, the final decades of the 19th century emerge as profoundly fluid.

By the time that Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were elected, a fusion of liberalism and state activism had already emerged, making this statement by Wilson a truism rather than a pledge: The antagonism between business and Government is over. Nancy Cohen may intend it as no compliment, but nonetheless she concludes, “The political and ideological reconstruction of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era conserved, not transcended, liberalism.”

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