Land Reform and Working-Class Experience in Britain and the United States, 1800-1862 (review)

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Land Reform and Working-Class Experience in Britain and the United States, 1800–1862. By Jamie L. Bronstein (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999) 372 pp. $55.00

As Bronstein writes, a large number of workers in both Britain and the United States in the 1840s "saw in land reform a shining future" (247). Why this was the case, and why the British and American land reform movements came to such different outcomes, is the subject of this interesting and carefully researched book.

Bronstein convincingly argues that three major reform organizations—the National Reform movement in the United States, and the Chartist Co-Operative Land Company and the Potters' Joint-Stock Emigration Society in Britain—were not anachronistic, but rational responses to the growth of capitalism and urbanization. For the Chartists, land reform provided an alternative strategy to improve the condition of workers after their earlier attempts at political reform had failed; for American workers, land reform seemed a way to avoid the fate of their British counterparts. "Rather than a quiescent pastoralism, workers' land-reform movements attempted to achieve an organization of society which had not been seen before," demanding "purposeful intervention into the free market" to curb "the worse excesses of capitalism" (4). In fact, in their emphasis on the value of labor and political and social equality, the three movements were quite radical.

In many ways, the British and American movements were remarkably similar, justifying their demands in terms of a shared stock of land reformist ideas propounded by such thinkers as Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and William Cobbett. The movements often used similar language and imagery, drawn in part from the Bible and the Christian tradition. Regarding land as a form of natural right, all three movements saw reform as a way to protect workers from the evils of the factory and the city and to create a more "healthy" society, although they affirmed private property and rejected more collectivist solutions. Included in their idea of "health" was the restoration of the traditional patriarchal family, since land would allow women to be removed from the factories and restored to the home where they naturally belonged. Finally, all three movements, which maintained contact with each other, drew on a common stock of organizational strategies, developing their own newspapers, holding mass public meetings, marching, and petitioning to make land reform a public cause.

Given the remarkable similarity of the three movements, why did the British ones end in failure and the American one succeed? The answer, Bronstein suggests, lies in the difference between their followers and the response of the state. Although all three movements were working class, they actually differed significantly. The Chartist land-reform movement, on which Bronstein mainly focuses, was confined almost entirely to northern factory workers. Connecting land reform to the factory question and to trade unionism, they defined themselves,

sometimes belligerently, in class terms, and self-consciously opposed the middle-class Anti-Corn Law League and its free-trade program. More extreme in its embrace of a class discourse, the Chartist land-reform movement seemed threatening, possibly even revolutionary. In consequence, the powerful and centralized British state, encouraged by an almost uniformly hostile press and seemingly justified by the excesses of Feargus O'Connor, the Chartist leader, intervened to crush the movement.

In contrast, National Reform in the United States attracted a broader and more prosperous cross section of artisans and worked to establish cross-class alliances with employers and farmers around a shared goal of ending monopoly. The movement therefore seemed to fit better into an American mainstream and seemed less threatening to the weaker American state. The result was that National Reform succeeded in having land reform included in a national political agenda that climaxed with the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862, which provided free access to land.

Bronstein's comparative method works particularly well in explaining the opposite outcomes of the British and American reform movements, reminding us how useful it can be to put national histories in an international context. The British and American movements represented perhaps the last moment when workers could see the growth of capitalist industrialization as a transient phenomenon. Although the future lay in cities, land reform remained a powerful impulse in both countries well into the twentieth century. As Bronstein puts it, "They [land reform leaders] were bound by the common notions that the right to life entailed the right to the wherewithal to live, that society bore a responsibility for the physical welfare and social happiness of its citizens, and that the independence inherent in farming created the most responsible cities and the most acceptable and ample definition of freedom. . . . The vitalization of this ideology, together with an abiding mystique in, and nostalgia for, the land, would be the land reformers' greatest legacy to the future" (250).

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Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837–1876. By Margaret Homans (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998) 299 pp. cloth $44.00 paper $18.00.

In this artfully crafted, highly original book, Homans situates representations of Queen Victoria in visual images, literary texts, and the Queen's own published memoirs within the history of British monarchism throughout the first four decades of her reign. She concludes that certain features of those royal representations both preserved the mon-