PROJECT MUSE®

*The Bowery Boys: Street Corner Radicals and the Politics of
Rebellion* (review)

Lucas Richert

Journal for the Study of Radicalism, Volume 2, Number 2, 2009, pp.
149-151 (Review)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsr.0.0005>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/254914>

famous protest novel tradition" (1), but there has been no examination of the protest novel to rival Norman's work on the protest essay. Nor have scholars theorized a poetics of engagement for the protest speech, the protest autobiography, the protest pamphlet, the protest poem, or the protest image-text. Norman's highly convincing argument that there exists an "American protest imaginary" (19) and that "*protest* defines a formal tradition in its own right" (12) is a challenge to build on his groundbreaking work.

Zoe Trodd

Harvard University

■ *The Bowery Boys: Street Corner Radicals and the Politics of Rebellion*

Peter Adams

Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005. 168 pp., ISBN 0-275-98538-5, \$39.99

Peter Adams's express goal in this well-researched and lively 168-page text is to separate fact from myth and explore the political dimensions of New York City's Bowery Boys gang. Building on the previous research done by Gustavus Myers, Sean Wilentz, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Bowery Boys* is in part a biography of the hard-drinking, Spartan Association leader and Democratic insurgent, Mike Walsh. Charismatic and formidable, Walsh articulated "the views of the far left of the Jacksonian democracy of the 1840s and 1850s" (xi). But in a broader sense, the book examines New York City's demographic changes, its appalling working conditions, and its inequality. *The Bowery Boys* is also an instructive book for those readers interested in the history of Tammany Hall, the Democratic Party's internecine squabbling, and as popularized by Martin Scorsese in 2002, the ruffians and scrappers that participated in certain *Gangs of New York*.

At the heart of *The Bowery Boys* is Mike Walsh. His was a New York of ethnic and class division. Adams contends that the Industrial Revolution had fostered division by modifying the nature of the urban workplace. He also holds that, by 1820, economic and political power had come to be controlled by a group of commercial and merchant elites (26). Walsh, an anti-intellectual rabble-rouser, recognized and inveighed against this growing inequality. He voiced the frustrations of New York's poverty-stricken immigrants and native-born alike with his incendiary newspaper *Subterranean*. Thereafter, as a New York state legislator and United States Representative, Walsh continued to

criticize the system and promulgated a progressive agenda that supported fair labor practices, a ten-hour workday, and the end of child labor. In doing this, Adams argues that Walsh added a radical “political dimension” to the Bowery Boys, one that is important for historians of the period to recognize (xiii).

In short, Mike Walsh was radical in a radical time and place, a point hammered home with vigor in this book. Adams cites Walt Whitman, one of Walsh’s on-again, off-again supporters as writing, “At this moment New York is the most radical city in America” (63). Adams himself characterizes New York as “a center of radical thinking,” a safe haven rife with bohemians, trade-unionists, and utopian socialists (63). Walsh, a product of this environment, touted the *Subterranean* as “the most radical paper on earth” (xxi). And Walsh’s Bowery Boys, according to Adams, represented “a radical insurgency that threatened the public order and existing class relations” (xxii).

A significant problem with *The Bowery Boys*, however, is that “radical” remains a nebulous concept throughout. Adams opts not to define the term. Nor does he meditate upon previous authors’ treatment of his topic. Another reviewer, Iain Borrowman, has observed that the book’s approach and its dearth of jargon—terms such as “radical,” “metaphoricity,” “diacritic,” and “hegemonic”—ought to be viewed positively. *The Bowery Boys* is a first-rate yarn, period. Move on. (Iain Borrowman, *Journal of American Studies* 41, 2007, 193). Indeed, it is a pleasurable read. I could not help but think that an early discussion of “radicalism” would enrich Adams’s overall objective of examining the Bowery Boys’ political dimensions, and furthermore, that this discussion would speak to the question of just how radical the Bowery Boys were. Adams clarifies that Walsh promoted the end of child labor and fair labor standards, but he deigned not to promote armed insurrection to achieve these ends. He was, for all the revolutionary rhetoric, hopeful that reforms within the Democratic Party and the larger political system would accelerate the democratization of capitalism and narrow class divisions. Is that truly radical? Perhaps, perhaps not. The reader cannot possibly know, since Adams chooses not to delineate a definition of radicalism.

Another troublesome aspect of *The Bowery Boys* has to do with presentation. If Adams’s approach to the subject matter is innovative, its execution is erratic. Lacking a clear direction and discernible game plan, the narrative drive is sporadic. Adams’s book greatly increases the reader’s knowledge on a host of topics, but nonetheless has a haphazard feel.

Despite these minor quibbles, *The Bowery Boys* offers a lucid and stimulating portrait of Mike Walsh and a number of other colorful insurgents, including David Broderick, Thomas Skidmore, and Levi Slamm. Adams deftly

demonstrates that gang culture in New York was not only about boozing and brawling. It also fomented certain radical political thoughts. Adams adds to the understanding of New York's Bowery Boys.

Lucas Richert

University of London

■ *Subterranean Fire: A History of Working-Class Radicalism in the United States*

Sharon Smith

Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006. 377 pp., ISBN 193185923X, \$16.00

In this book Sharon Smith asserts an appreciation of and argument for the relationship among radicals, effective strategy, and the labor movement. Her book recounts some of the most dramatic moments in labor history, all with the purpose of supporting an appeal to the possibilities for the future if American workers can understand their inherited past, a past that is still largely hidden from view despite the vast social history that has been uncovered in the last generation or so.

Like Jeremy Brecher's classic *Strike!*, Smith concentrates on the contentious battlegrounds and stories, mostly of industrial workers. But she rejects the notion of spontaneity and puts the politics of the movement back in, bringing forward Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky and the many variants of organized and politicized radicals into a discussion of the labor movement's history. She is a socialist who favors Trotskyist theory, and she has selected engaging narrative stories to back her argument that a significant percentage of the American working class has been inclined toward radical visions and mass action on par with that of many other countries with vibrant labor movements. Her main thesis suggests that, for a variety of peculiar circumstances, radical concepts that used to be part of the "subterranean fire" of working-class life were snuffed out of the dialogue within the labor movement. The McCarthy era is a decisive moment from which the U.S. working class has never recovered. Her book wants to alert activist workers to the relevance of radical ideas and theory in order to inspire the next generation of radical leaders of the working class to guard against misleaders and union bureaucrats. These factors, along with a toll of employer repression and racial division, are the key explanations given for why the United States does not have a vital labor movement that can contest power effectively.