Leaders of Reform

La Forte, Robert Sherman

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Leaders of Reform was published in 1974, at the culmination of the dramatic social and political upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s. The book was written at a time when America was reshaped by major protest movements, and the same was true about the Progressive movement that thrived in the United States from around 1900 to 1920. Scholars are products of their times, and it is not surprising that historians who matured professionally during the 1960s and 1970s would be interested in the Progressive Era. Groundbreaking works such as Robert Wiebe’s The Search for Order, 1877–1920 (1967) and Lawrence Goodwyn’s Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America (1976) reconstructed the way the Progressive and Populist movements were born, grew, and developed. Historians writing during the 1960s and 1970s were naturally interested in social movements and change, and the elite-led reform of the Progressive Era offered an interesting contrast with the grassroots movements of the sixties.

Leaders of Reform earned a largely positive reception upon its release. In his June 1975 review of the book in the Journal of American History David Thelen highlighted the work as “one of the best monographs on the political and legislative activities of a state’s progressive leaders.” Lewis Gould praised La Forte in the Southwestern Historical Quarterly for having a “balanced view of his actors. He is aware of the mixed motives of both progressives and conservatives” (July 1975, 79:108–109). And LeRoy Ashby, writing in the Pacific Northwest Quarterly, credited the work as a meaningful contribution to the history of the Kansas progressive movement. The work was criticized as well, primarily for its lack of statistical analysis. Thelen stated that the main problem with the book was that it lacked explanatory power and that the author “just does not care about popular attitudes.” One reviewer was more specific, arguing that the author should have analyzed roll-call votes or dissected electoral results by demographic group. Leaders of Reform was a fine local study, the
reviewer stated, but “such studies . . . need to be methodologically more sophisticated and intellectually more rigorous than Leaders of Reform.” (Theoharis 1975, 199–200).

Leaders of Reform was published at another moment of transition: the movement toward social history. The book was a work of standard political history recounting the way in which a cast of seventy Kansas progressive Republican reformers—including businessmen, newspapermen, politicians, and social leaders—built the Progressive movement in their state. That is, the work focused on a community of white male political elites at a time when the trend among historians was moving away from political history and toward social history. This explains why reviewers criticized the work’s lack of statistical analysis, a key method used by social historians to establish generalities about communities. Although it suffered from bad timing, Leaders of Reform was true to its title: it was about the leaders of progressivism in Kansas, not the rank and file. The historiographical trend since Leaders of Reform was published has been decidedly toward examining social groups and marginalized communities. More recent studies of the Progressive movement have focused on the reform impulse in marginalized communities, such as women and the poor, and the Progressives’ reputation has particularly suffered as scholars have more closely examined the Progressive record on race. Recent events have also continued to spur lines of inquiry regarding the Progressives.

The end of the Cold War increased interest in the international context that birthed the American Progressive movement, and the War on Terror provoked studies focusing on the role violence and terrorism played in shaping Progressive political discourse.

Recent political developments have driven a resurgence of interest in political history, and it is timely that Leaders of Reform receive a second look. The work reconstructs how the Kansas reform movement took root in the state Republican Party, how reformers were able to capture the organization, and the ways in which their reform project succeeded or failed. Understanding the path Kansas progressive Republicans used to take control of their state party in the early twentieth century gives us perspective on how the progressive Democrats or Trumpian Republicans are working to take or maintain control of their parties today. There are lessons for modern reformers in the story of how Kansas Progressives struggled to address a system that they believed was engineered to keep control in the hands of the establishment. Progressive reformers encountered successes
and failures as they sought to advance their cause, and reformers today would do well to studiously examine the Progressives’ record. Leaders of Reform is a valuable work that was appreciated in its day, and it has tremendous potential to help educate and inspire historians and would-be reformers alike on a continuing basis.

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