

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1989

Review of The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865-1900

Robert W. Cherny

San Francisco State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Cherny, Robert W., "Review of The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865-1900" (1989). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 532.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/532>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

McNall, a specialist in social theory, does not present a narrative of the Populist movement in Kansas. He begins, instead, with theoretical concepts on the nature of class, drawn from E. P. Thompson and others. For McNall, as for other recent social theorists, class involves much more than relationship to the means of production. It has to do, instead, with a process through which a group recognizes its class interests, organizes to support them, expresses its identity ideologically, and "act[s] as a class for itself" (p. 11, emphasis in original). Kansas Populism, then, presents an opportunity for a case study of a potential class movement, one that ultimately failed.

McNall identifies two principal causes for the failure of Kansas Populism as a class movement. First, the rapid growth of the Alliance and its immediate turn to politics prevented development of a common understanding and ideology. This in turn inhibited the development of sufficient cohesion for Kansas farmers to form a lasting class organization. Second, Kansas Populism quickly came to be dominated by an oligarchy, out of touch with the party's membership, that formed coalitions that party members could not understand. As a consequence, cross-cutting determinants of previous political identity reemerged and the Populist Party died. In formulating this thesis, however, McNall gives too little attention to the party structure of caucuses, conventions, and platforms, through which the party's grass-roots expressed their ideological convictions and understanding of issues, and which connected party voters to party leaders.

The book contains some errors of fact and unsupported interpretations at variance with standard treatments. The worst example is a reference to Cleveland's "crushing defeat in 1892" (p. 286). McNall also has Bryan losing to McKinley primarily because of increased turnout in the northeast, although in the next sentence he presents an entirely different ex-

The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865-1900. By Scott G. McNall. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. Illustrations, photographs, figures, map, preface, epilogue, end notes, bibliography, index. xviii + 354 pp. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

During the six decades since publication of John Hicks's *The Populist Revolt*, scholars have produced highly diverse interpretations of the Populist movement of the 1890s. Scott G. McNall, professor of sociology at the University of Kansas, contributes to that dialogue by using Kansas Populism to explore concepts in political economy and especially in the nature of class identity.

planation looking to the competitiveness of key Middle Western, border, and western states (pp. 288-89).

McNall's reading of the national political economy, based almost entirely on a few secondary works, is much too simplistic. He presents case studies of two Kansas counties, but both were on the eastern border and neither was strongly Populist. Both case studies exhibit analytical vagueness. His analysis of voting and leadership contains some material of interest, but hard data are disappointingly sparse.

ROBERT W. CHERNY
Department of History
San Francisco State University