

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and  
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Spring 2001

**Review of *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and  
Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* by Jim Bissett**

Garin Burbank  
*University of Winnipeg*

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



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

---

Burbank, Garin, "Review of *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* by Jim Bissett" (2001). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 555.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/555>

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 Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920.** Jim Bissett. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. xviii+249 pp. Tables, illustrations, notes, references. \$33.95 cloth (ISBN 0-8061-3148-9).

Jim Bissett's well-written book on the Socialist Party of Oklahoma goes down a well-worn path. In his search for a usable past to illuminate the hidden strength of an authentic American radicalism, he finds roughly what most radical scholars find when they indict the spurious openness of American democracy (176). Oklahoma tenant-farmers are exploited, co-opted, and coerced; large landowners and commercial interests are by turns clever and rapacious; an effective protest movement inspires radical insurgents whose appeal becomes "extraordinarily powerful" for a short period (99); the movement becomes so threatening to the political and economic dominance of the "interests" that they resort to state-sponsored repression to scatter the insurgents (178).

This is an interpretation first advanced with vigor and sophistication in James R. Green's *Grass Roots Socialism* (1978). Bissett, however, attempts to lend some variety to the quest for a radical past. Much like his mentor, Larry Goodwyn, he locates the origins of radicalism in a "movement culture" spawned by hard-won experience in the Indian Farmers' Union, whose activities in the same locales preceded the growth of the Socialist Party by a few years. More audaciously, Bissett claims that fundamentalist forms of Christianity "meshed seamlessly with the politics of Marxism" to help "the dispossessed make sense of the world's imperfections" (99). What emerged, in Bissett's view, was a perfect blend of Marx, Jesus, and Jefferson that called forth the most successful third-party revolt since Populism. So potent was the combination of religious faith expressed in "baptism of the spirit" and Marxist class analysis that the dominant Democratic party had to resort to restrictive voting regulations and then outright repression to eliminate the Socialist "threat."

Other writers will not be so easily persuaded that the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount were perfectly blended with Marxist calls for class warfare. The author does not adequately consider the possibility that these were overlapping rhetorics that jostled uneasily in the same party. Nor does he acknowledge that war-time prosperity might have made many tenants more interested in new Fords than in socialism. Victor Harlow, a leading Democrat and favorite source for the author, thought so, but Bissett decides to ignore his witness on this score. Bissett also knows of the potential of

farm price series analysis, as seen in his Appendix A. But so committed is he to the idea that repression killed the Socialist Party of Oklahoma that he offers no evidence on war-time cotton and wheat prices. Overall, this is a bright, lucid, provocative book, but one that does not settle the old issues. **Garin Burbank**, *Department of History, University of Winnipeg*.