

## Producerist Politics in the Era of Emancipation

Hild, Matthew. *Arkansas's Gilded Age: The Rise, Decline, and Legacy of Populism and Working-Class Protest*.

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Matthew Hild's *Arkansas's Gilded Age* is misnamed. The volume is at once much less and much more than the main title advertises. It is less because Hild does not attempt to be wide ranging in his coverage of the Natural State during the period stretching from Reconstruction through the end of the nineteenth century. There is little reckoning with the substantial social and cultural upheavals that accompanied the end of the Civil War and the efforts to rebuild the devastated state. But the volume is more than the title suggests in that it is a fascinating and insightful study of producerist politics in the era of emancipation. In fact, it is among the best of such studies available.

Hild details the efforts of Arkansas farmers, tenants, miners, railroaders, and laborers to protect their economic prospects during a period of economic concentration, stagnant wages, and falling commodity prices. Like their counterparts throughout late nineteenth-century America, Arkansas workers embraced producerism—the belief that those engaged in productive labor are being unjustly deprived of the wealth they produce by a parasitic class of bankers, monopolists, and middlemen—and joined organizations devoted to ensuring that wealth stayed in the pockets of those who created it. Better than anyone else, Hild traces the connections between the Grangers, Knights of Labor, Alliancemen, trade unionists, and Arkansas's homegrown producerist groups; the Agricultural Wheel and the Brothers of Freedom. During times of the greatest economic uncertainty, these Arkansas workers and their organizations turned to third-party activism, first the Greenback-Labor Party but later the Union Labor and Populist Parties.

The decision to use Arkansas as a case study makes sense. The state was at the forefront of producerist politics for much of the era, with the Greenback-Labor and Union Labor Parties being surprisingly strong and attracting the support of substantial numbers of freedpeople. In fact, Arkansas seemed to be about five years ahead of other southern states—at least the ones with white majorities—and the “Populist moment” occurred there in the late 1880s rather than the 1890s. Thus, both producerists and their critics elsewhere looked to the Arkansas experience to guide them.

Hild makes it quite clear that producerism offered the only viable challenge to the politics of white supremacy embraced by the dominant Democratic Party. Implicit in the calls from activists to unite all producers of wealth was the erasure of racial difference, and African American workingmen hurried to join. Although white Arkansas producerists had trouble, at times, accepting their black counterparts, the most

successful organizations—the Knights of Labor and the Agricultural Wheel—were the most egalitarian.

Initially the Arkansas Democratic Party's strategy in dealing with the challenge from farmers and workers was to co-opt the producerist agenda—inflation, banking regulation, anti-monopolism, and land reform. By the late 1880s, though, this strategy had run its course, and, when the Agricultural Wheel and the Knights of Labor came together in Arkansas under the Union Labor Party banner, the Democratic Party had to employ violence, assassination, and fraud in order to maintain control. Hild makes clear that producerism was not rejected by Arkansas voters but rather by violent and undemocratic forces.

In the wake of the bloody elections of 1888 and 1890, the state's Democrats realized that political violence and fraud were not sustainable and turned to disfranchisement measures, which reduced the number of working-class voters, and segregation laws to stymie efforts to bring blacks and whites together in civic life. The push for disfranchisement and segregation proved effective: not only did the People's Party fail to make much of an impact in the state, but Democrats in other southern states employed the Arkansas model to turn back the Populist challenge.

In Hild's telling, the arrival of disfranchisement and Jim Crow fractured producerism in the state. One stream made peace with white supremacy and championed white workers in their battles against the tyrannies of corporations and bankers. The leader of the white producerists, Jeff Davis, was derided as the Karl Marx of the Hillbillies, but he met with great success, serving three terms as governor before entering the U.S. Senate. The other stream continued to inform those hoping to bring white and black workers together, including most famously the members of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union.

Pieces of what Hild details in this book are already known from the work of C. Vann Woodward, Lawrence Goodwyn, Charles Postel, Kenneth C. Barnes, Raymond Arsenault, and Hild himself. But what makes *Arkansas's Gilded Age* impressive is that Hild creates a single narrative that documents the complexities of producerist politics over multiple decades. With just 140 pages of clear and concise text at a reasonable price, the volume would work well in the classroom.