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Nancy Unger
Santa Clara University, nunger@scu.edu

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Russell Nye and the Unending Struggle to Keep Government Representative

By Nancy C. Unger

In his invitation to participate in this symposium on Russell Nye's *Midwestern Progressive Politics: A Historical Study of Its Origins and Development, 1870-1950*, Jon Lauck gave us free rein. He did, however, suggest that we comment on how the book has aged and what Nye missed; how the reform era can be seen in regional terms; and whether Midwestern reform was moderate or radical. To address his first possibility: upon re-reading this classic, my overall reaction was decidedly mixed. In many ways, the book is emphatically a product of 1951. In contrast to today's political histories, the lacunas are jarring: the political importance of gender, race (including whiteness as well as the contributions and experiences of people of color), ethnicity, and global context are either barely mentioned or ignored entirely. It would take an essay much longer than this one to show how scholars have worked to expand our horizons over the decades.¹

Nevertheless, there's plenty to admire and to value in this volume. Rather than provide a forced march through the vast number of individuals, groups, trends, and movements that take up Nye's focus on Midwestern reform, the overall work represents a thoughtful and nuanced accounting and appraisal, often using wry humor and measured assessments to provide a narrative of largely even-handed judgments. Nye's decision to provide a mini-historiographic essay for each chapter rather than a traditional bibliography is an invaluable guide to some of the classic literature in the field, as well as to what are now more obscure sources.

Nye is particularly adept at showing the relationships between seemingly disparate movements, revealing linkages and influences as the various groups wax and wane. I can't imagine how he kept such a large cast of characters straight. The usual suspects are here (Bryan, the Populists, the Grange) but also many lesser known Midwestern progressive figures, groups, and causes, especially from the waning years of the movement. Nye's coverage of the Conference for Progressive Political action (CPPA) and the Non Partisan League is particularly thoughtful and engaging.

It's too easy to disparage a book published seventy years ago for not incorporating the diverse and inclusive coverage expected today, but as a biographer of both Robert La Follette and Belle La Follette, Nye's total neglect of the latter made me appreciate anew the importance of

¹ Such a record would include, for example, Sara Egge's excellent *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870-1920* (University of Iowa Press, 2018). Particularly useful extant historiographic essays on Progressive Era politics include Cristina V. Groeger's "Radicalism and Conservatism," and, especially, Thomas J. Jablonsky's "The Midwest and Far West During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era," both in *A Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, eds. Christopher McKnight Nichols and Nancy C. Unger (Wiley Blackwell 2017), as well as Robert D. Johnston, "Re-Democratizing the Progressive Era: The Politics of Progressive Era Political Historiography," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1:1 (January 2002): 68-92.

women's history, one of the many fields of study absent from Nye's account.² We miss the stories of women's many political contributions, including their tireless efforts to bring women's suffrage to the Midwest and the nation. We miss Belle La Follette's fight against the efforts of the Woodrow Wilson administration to racially segregate Washington, DC. We miss the crusade that she and other Midwestern women waged for world peace.

Robert La Follette, however, serves as kind of a touchstone for Nye—he returns to him again and again. And while I commend Nye's appreciation of Bob La Follette's efforts, he and I have a fundamental difference over how those activities—and, in fact, the philosophies and actions of most Midwestern reformers of this period—should be characterized. This brings me to Jon Lauch's intriguing question if Midwestern reform was moderate or radical. For Nye, the answer is simple. He confidently declares that no Midwestern reformers “could justifiably be classed as ‘radical,’ and even those who came close to it...proposed concrete ways of dealing with immediate problems of railroads, currency, and credit, rather than demanding sweeping political revolutions” (p. 10).³

Perhaps it boils down to semantics, but I take umbrage at Nye's belief that only a sweeping political revolution qualifies as radical. In my historical analysis, the Midwestern progressives, faced with the overwhelming power of the railroads, trusts, and political machines, were not only audacious, but often downright radical in their conviction that oligarchies could be broken up, corruption combatted through regulation, and that common people should enjoy the benefits of genuine democracy. They tended to believe that capitalism and humane working and living conditions were not mutually exclusive. It can be far more radical to try to reform existing economic and political systems from within than to simply burn them down and start again. When you consider what Midwestern progressives were up against, it *was* radical to attempt to solve so many overwhelming problems; to fight back against such deeply entrenched and powerful corruption rather than respond with cynicism, resignation, nihilism, or simply complacency.

I also bristle at Nye's charge that the Achilles heel of Midwestern progressives was their provincialism. Certainly the agrarian nature of the region shaped much of its agenda—just as the more industrial east shaped its reformers, yet the latter's progressive achievements are rarely devalued because they best served urban industrial centers and weren't uniformly applicable across the country. And many of the reforms originating in the Midwest *were* implemented nationally. Perhaps Nye's best chapter, “The Capture of the Ivory Tower” is far more than a straightforward account of the innovations to education and politics wrought by the Wisconsin Idea. It provides an especially compelling presentation of the profound challenges to the prevailing beliefs about the purpose of education. Midwestern progressives placed education centrally in the social and political order, promoted the mission of the university “as a functioning unit in the citizen's daily life” (p. 157), and recognized the vital nature of academic freedom. I shudder to think what academic life would be like today without the reforms of the

² Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (2nd ed., University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); *Belle La Follette: Progressive Era Reformer* (Routledge, 2016).

³ All parenthetical page numbers in the body of this essay correspond with the 1951 edition of *Midwestern Progressive Politics*.

Midwestern progressives. (It is nonetheless jarring to see Edward A. Ross's many contributions to sociology and education reform hailed by Nye with no mention of his promotion of eugenics).

I've got a few bones to pick with Nye about the life and legacy of Bob La Follette. He repeats, accepting at face value, a few old (inaccurate) chestnuts, some promoted by La Follette himself. He reports, for example, that the misquoting of La Follette's St. Paul's 1919 speech was "one of the most blatant offenses against truth in the history of journalism" (p. 316). La Follette was vilified after being widely misquoted as saying that the United States had "no grievance" against Germany. Both Nye and La Follette, however, ignored that although in his speech La Follette sarcastically acknowledged that the United States had suffered "serious" grievances, he then argued plainly that those grievances were insufficient to justify war.

Nye correctly identifies La Follette as the "greatest" leader of Midwestern progressivism, but I believe he seriously errs when he claims that "when he died, it died with him" (p. 207). We can quibble over whether there have been "great" Midwestern progressive leaders since La Follette, but Nye himself acknowledges that many of La Follette's ideas and programs that made up Midwestern progressivism lived on, in Wisconsin and across the nation, long after his death (p. 296). And Nye's rather snarky comments on La Follette's lack of a world view (p. 223; 229) have been compellingly disproven by a range of scholars, most notably Richard Drake in *The Education of an Anti-Imperialist: Robert La Follette and U.S. Expansion* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

Nye is so determined that "La Follette thought it [America] was Wisconsin and the Midwest" (p. 307) that he misses that La Follette wasn't referring just to beleaguered Midwestern farmers when he declared, "The supreme issue, involving all the others, is the encroachment of the powerful few upon the rights of the many." In 1890, for example, as violence and intimidation destroyed post-war progress and entrenched white rule in the South, he warned his fellow Representatives, "You cannot maintain a domestic election system rooted in perjury and fraud and watered with blood and not see it finally blossom and fruit in bitterness and hate and awful retribution." His concern for the rights of all Americans extended to women as well: "Woman suffrage is but the extension of the principle of democracy [and] will result in a more enlightened better balanced citizenship."⁴

In sum, Nye's very good book is nonetheless characteristic in its treatment of issues and of individuals exemplified by his approach to the La Follettes, of the more narrow and domestic focus of the "old" political history. Turning to him seventy years later, for me, reaffirms the value of the "new" more inclusive political history.

Even with his somewhat limited focus, however, Nye offers sophisticated and important judgements and proposes some fascinating counterfactual possibilities. His keen insights include recognition of Theodore Roosevelt's "failure as a real progressive leader" (p. 250). Had Roosevelt "been more of a progressive and less of a politician," Nye makes a strong case that he might have made a successful effort to meld and promote its disparate and regional elements (p. 239).

One of my favorite scenes in the 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, features R.P. McMurphy, played by Jack Nicholson. McMurphy is horrified by the complacency of his fellow

⁴ Quotes in Unger, *Fighting Bob*, pp. 88-90; 103.

patients in a mental hospital, accepting without question the authority of the tyrannical Nurse Ratched. He bets the other patients that he can lift an impossibly heavy hydrotherapy console, throw it through a window protected by thick metal mesh, and escape. Despite being told that “Nobody could ever lift that thing,” he gives the effort every ounce of his strength. Failing, he walks away saying, “But I tried, didn’t I, God damn it, at least I did that.” In the end, McMurphy is lobotomized and dies. But one of his fellow patients, so overwhelmed by the oppression of society that he had retreated into pretending that he was deaf and mute, is inspired to carry out what McMurphy attempted but could not complete. He uses his superior size and strength to heave the hydrotherapy console through the window, rejecting the crippling authority he had passively accepted, and escapes to freedom.

I like to think of the Midwestern Progressives as a version of R.P. McMurphy—somewhat crude, sometimes provincial or self-serving, without a unified, sophisticated plan of action. But they tried to model ways to recognize and resist tyranny and to achieve freedom, at least they did that. And, as Nye acknowledges, their efforts profoundly and permanently changed the nation (p. 296). In the words of *Emporia Gazette* editor William Allen White (of “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” fame) speaking of Robert La Follette, “When all is said and done, he and the insurgent group are the best element down here—the most sincere, the nearest to the people, the most truly representative of our national opinion. And it is too much to demand that they be immaculate...giants. Almighty God carves out his ends with dull tools—always.”⁵

It remains up to us to decide if we wish to improve their methods and pursue the more thorough going democracy and freedom they envisioned, however imperfectly, through their particular brands of progressivism. In the words of Bob La Follette, it was never up to only his generation of progressives: “America is not made, but is in the making. There is an unending struggle to make and keep government representative.”⁶

Seventy years on, Russell Nye’s book reveals the strengths as well as the weaknesses of scholarly trends concerning history in 1950. Its erudite analysis and richly researched scholarship provides a deep dive into many aspects of the complex history of Midwestern progressives. It therefore can serve as a valuable tool in continuing their struggle.

⁵ Quote in Unger, *Fighting Bob*, p. 6. For more on White’s brand of Midwestern progressivism, see Charles Delgadillo, *Crusader for Democracy: The Political Life of William Allen White* (University Press of Kansas, 2018).

⁶ La Follette delivered this speech during his 1924 presidential campaign in some of the earliest sound film ever made: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5plfw9dV24&t=6s>