

*Radical Protest and Social Structure: The Southern Farmers' Alliance and Cotton Tenancy, 1880-1890.* By Michael Schwartz. (New York: Academic, 1976. xi + 302 pp. Charts, tables, notes, and index. \$17.50.)

Sociologist Michael Schwartz's well-written monograph is an uneasy combination of New Left social theory and a sketch of the history of the Southern Farmers' Alliance from 1886 to roughly 1889. Less satisfactory as history than Robert C. McMath, Jr.'s *Populist Vanguard* or Lawrence Goodwyn's *Democratic Promise* (neither of which Schwartz was aware of when his book went to press), Schwartz's study offers a wholly economic explanation of the origin of the Alliance, and an indictment of its leadership as oligarchs whose class and personal interests contradicted those of the membership and caused the failure of the organization.

Assuming, on the basis of very scanty evidence, that labor mobility was very low, that there was extensive collusion between planters, merchants, and cotton factors, and that a solvent cotton farmer had only a 50 percent probability of making a profit in this period, Schwartz argues that southern agriculture by the 1890s consisted almost entirely of tenants hopelessly in debt, insolvent yeomen, and prosperous planter-merchants. The Alliance and other social upheavals in the 1880s and

1890s, Schwartz believes, were “intimately tied to the structure and development of the tenant farming system” (p. 88). By 1890, he claims, Alliancemen “were in a position to mold and reshape” the structure of the tenant farming system (p. 246).

Schwartz’s economic assumptions and conclusions are challengeable, or at least insufficiently supported, and his claimed connection between the tenant farming structure and the Alliance is tenuous. It is not at all clear that tenants or insolvent yeomen dominated any considerable part of the Alliance, or that the programs of the organization would have alleviated tenancy. Moreover, Schwartz places too little emphasis on such state and national issues as Democratic political misrule, deflation, and the trusts, which, if the Alliance and Populist platforms and speeches were even weakly related to farmers’ thoughts, led many to join these groups.

If his generalizations in chapters 8 to 12 about the dynamics of radical protest groups are often insightful—the book is worth reading just for his critiques and theory—Schwartz’s application of his ideas to the Alliance is less successful. Largely ignoring the middle-level activists, the local leaders, traveling lecturers, and organizers on whom Goodwyn focuses, and breaking off his analysis before the controversy over the subtreasury and the major farmer move into politics, Schwartz concentrates on what he believes were the contradictory interests of leaders and members. Local Alliances, which he tends to assume were controlled by yeomen and tenants, lost power as the organization’s office-hungry, élite-status leadership increasingly stressed political campaigns and other statewide operations. Thus the Alliance became less and less relevant to what he views as its *raison d’être*—an attack on the local power structure.

As often exasperating as it is thought-provoking, Schwartz’s volume will satisfy few historians, but its enticing speculations should stimulate more research and lead historians to become more self-conscious in theorizing about organizations.