As a young, left-leaning historian in the 1970s, my admiration for the Nonpartisan League (NPL)—as was the case for many—came from the inspiring film Northern Lights. In his wonderful, deeply researched, and beautifully written book, Insurgent Democracy, Michael J. Lansing forces readers to reconsider the NPL’s meaning for the history of American politics. To Lansing, the importance of the League is not as an example of anticapitalist social revolt, as portrayed in the movie and much of the literature, but rather as a model of engaged citizens trying to make government responsive to popular will. As such, the NPL offers important lessons for today’s intensely fragmented and dysfunctional politics that have left people feeling either disconnected or rabidly partisan.

The NPL emerged from the discontent of wheat farmers on the North Dakota plains. Squeezed by high mortgage rates and corporate control over commodity prices and shipping rates, citizens flocked to an innovative organization that took advantage of Progressive-Era democratic reforms to mount a successful takeover of state politics—not with a third party, but through a non-partisan capture of the direct primaries. While many of the originators of this approach had cut their political teeth in the Populist or Socialist parties, the League was neither an organization of backward-looking agrarians nor anticapitalist revolutionaries. Instead, the NPL eschewed abstract theoretical divisions for widely varying practical reform elements that could use government to challenge “the unchecked accumulation of capital even as it remained committed” to the capitalism of small producers (p. 25). By promoting a program of state-run grain mills, elevators, banks, and insurance, the NPL hoped to sustain middling farmers and create a political culture responsive to the needs of rural citizens.

The democratic and pro-capitalist character of the NPL was nonetheless disruptive of politics as usual, and thus subject to the counterattacks of powerful interests. During World War I, opponents engaged in red-baiting tactics, but the League survived and expanded into other wheat-growing regions of Canada and the Northwest, from Wisconsin to Washington. Far more damaging to the promises represented by the NPL were the internal debates generated by the top-down, authoritarian style of its leader Arthur Townley when confronting mobilized farmers who expected to participate in decision-making. That leadership style meant that once the NPL actually assumed the reins of government in North Dakota, opponents found
success by charging leaders with corruption, radicalism, and neglect of the farmers’ true interests. Ironically, the recall, one of the tools of direct democracy, proved the NPL’s undoing.

While the author mourns the short life of the NPL, he notes the importance of its legacies. The League developed a culture that launched the careers of progressive politicians, empowered women (albeit belatedly), built alliances between farmers and industrial workers, established the possibility of state-owned enterprises, modernized rural politics, and “articulated an agrarian moral economy that envisioned an alternative future for American capitalism” (p. 240). But, Lansing argues, the NPL was no forerunner of New Deal liberalism. Indeed, those who cut their political teeth in the NPL rejected the centralized, technical, and bureaucratic power that characterized New Deal agricultural policies.

Insurgent Democracy upends much of the earlier scholarship as well as popular mythology of the NPL and offers a different, but no less important, story of a popular social movement tackling economic inequity. It leaves the reader wishing for more on the League’s legacy in Canada and more comparative analysis of the conditions that led to the League’s success. At the same time, I wondered if Lansing’s praise for popular politics as an alternative to the norms of party politics and the limits it imposes has undergone any reconsideration.

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Faith in Black Power: Religion, Race, and Resistance in Cairo, Illinois

By Kerry Pimblott

(Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017. Pp. x, 320. Illustrations, figures, table, notes, bibliography, index. $45.00.)

Pimblott’s smart, deeply researched, persuasive study of black Christianity and black power could not have arrived at a better time. This is a local study with regional and national implications. Pimblott offers broad insights into the histories of white supremacy and creative black resistance, economic justice, vigilantism, mass incarceration, police violence, state repression of people of color, grassroots theologies, and more.

Pimblott challenges dominant “de-Christianization” narratives that characterize black power as antagonistic to black Christianity and largely disconnected from black liberation theologians like James Cone.