

A CRITICAL ESSAY ON AUTHORITIES

Since the National Farmers Alliance and the People's Party were sequential expressions of the same popular movement and the same democratic culture, the gradual evolution of the cooperative crusade that generated both was the central component of the agrarian revolt. This understanding came largely from primary sources: early Alliance newspapers such as the *Rural Citizen* (Jacksboro), *Southern Mercury*, *American Nonconformist*, *Kansas Farmer*, *Progressive Farmer*, *The Advocate* and the *National Economist*; later, the journals of the reform press association throughout the South and West, together with the surviving private papers, organizing pamphlets, and books of such agrarian spokesmen as L. H. Weller, A. P. Hungate, S. O. Daws, Henry Vincent, Charles Macune, W. Scott Morgan, Nelson Dunning, L. L. Polk, S. M. Scott, John B. Rayner, Charles Pierson, Thomas Cater, and Gasper C. Clemens, among others; papers of key opponents of the agrarian organizing drive: A. J. Rose, Pitchfork Ben Tillman, and James Hogg; manuscript collections bearing on silver lobbying: William Jennings Bryan, William Allen, Marion Butler, Ignatius Donnelly, Davis Waite, and William Stewart; and, lastly, national, state, and local organization records of the National Farmers Alliance and Industrial Union. The response of the larger society to the farmers' movement was visible in the nation's metropolitan press: the *Dallas News* was particularly useful in the early years, and, as the agrarian movement expanded, so were the *Atlanta Constitution*, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *Topeka Capital*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Montgomery Advertiser*, the *Nebraska Jour-*

nal, the *Post-Dispatch*, *Republic*, and *Globe-Democrat* of St. Louis, the *Journal* and *Sentinel* of Indianapolis, the *Chronicle* and *Examiner* of San Francisco, the *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* and the *New York Times*. These sources, along with rural weeklies and other primary materials cited throughout the footnotes, unavoidably create a completely restructured picture of the democratic dynamics of Alliance-Populism. Such a restructuring inevitably leads to a drastic reappraisal of the secondary literature of the agrarian revolt.

Adherents of the two political traditions that have acquired cultural sanction in twentieth-century thought, capitalism and socialism, have reached agreement about the specific events of the agrarian revolt. Drawing freely from one another in such a way as to produce a general consensus about "what happened" in the Gilded Age, they have proceeded in confidence that each could "see through" the doctrinal narrowness of the other concerning what it all meant. In these endeavors, scholars of both persuasions have relied on formal categories of political description that have been sanctioned as part of their respective intellectual traditions. With an apparent assurance so far unsubstantiated by the results achieved, socialist historians have applied class analysis to the national politics of the agrarian revolt. Capitalist historians, while borrowing a number of interpretative techniques from Marxist theory, have generally been content with less tightly organized modes of analysis; interestingly, their approaches to the politics, economics, and culture have often been based on assumptions about mass movements and capitalist economics that are even more remote from the realities of life than the class assumptions of their ideological competitors.

While these diverse efforts have produced a number of verdicts about the relative rigidity or flexibility of American capitalism, they have not generated much that is revealing about Populism. No one, it seems, has regarded the agrarian revolt as a mass democratic movement that was organically shaped by its own internal dynamics and by its own evolving popular culture of democratic thought.* Rather, Populism has emerged as some sort of spontaneous bourgeois or interest group protest, one that was either too radical to be accepted by the larger society or too conservative and insular to have historic meaning beyond its own moment in time.

At least five writers variously responsive to Marxist perspectives have written about the agrarian revolt—Norman Pollack, William Appelman Williams, Anna Rochester, Matthew Josephson, and Chester McArthur Destler. Understandably, in America, a much larger group of scholars—several hundred in fact—have written about Populism from a capitalist perspective. Clearly, the liberals and conservatives of the capitalist school have been far more influential in shaping both our perception of what happened and our

* For discussions of the effect of the prevailing categories of political description upon historical interpretations of the dynamics of popular democratic movements, see p. 623, n. 4; pp. 625–26, n. 49; p. 627, n. 51; p. 629, n. 18; p. 632, n. 14; p. 634, n. 32 and 39; pp. 638–39, n. 9; pp. 640–41, n. 15; pp. 649–50, n. 34 and 36; pp. 651–53, n. 39; p. 656, n. 4; p. 660, n. 6; pp. 666–67, n. 35; pp. 674–75, n. 44; pp. 676–77, n. 10; p. 679, n. 40; p. 683, n. 30; p. 685, n. 23; pp. 688–89, n. 26 and 28; p. 691, n. 34 and 35; p. 692, n. 10; p. 694, n. 15; and p. 701, n. 7.

sense of its social meaning. Indeed, inasmuch as John Hicks's description of the movement has been taken as a general guide to what happened, his pioneering work, *The Populist Revolt*, has strongly influenced all subsequent interpretations irrespective of point of view. Unfortunately, since the Alliance cooperative movement was not seen by Hicks as the core experience of the agrarian revolt, his lengthy work on the shadow movement of free silver has had a crippling influence on subsequent scholarship.*

The idea of the shadow movement as the crux of the agrarian revolt governs both the most influential attack on Populism, Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform*, and its most ardent defense, Norman Pollack's *The Populist Response to Industrial America*. Of the two, Hofstadter's study has been far more pervasive in its impact. Correctly finding the free-silver arguments of William Jennings Bryan and "Coin" Harvey to be superficial, Hofstadter persuasively indicts what he takes, on Hicksian terms, to be "Populism." He fortifies his analysis through the creation of an elaborately crafted cultural category, which he styled "The Agrarian Myth." Through this device, Hofstadter imputes to Populists a number of modes of self-analysis and national political analysis that were wholly alien to the actual interpretations American farmers achieved as a result of their cooperative struggle. While Hofstadter's misreading has a quality of grandeur, the source of his difficulty is not hard to locate: he managed to frame his interpretation of the intellectual content of Populism without recourse to a single reference to the planks of the Omaha Platform of the People's Party or to any of the economic, political, or cultural experiences that led to the creation of those goals. Indeed, there is no indication in his text that he was aware of these experiences.

Populists are not "intransigents," as they are to Hicks; to Hofstadter, they are scarcely present at all. A Populist indictment of corporate concentration, for example, "reads like a Jacksonian polemic." The dismay of Populists at the practices of American railroad land syndicates and English and Scottish land companies reveals the "anti-foreign" proclivities of people who viewed themselves as "innocent pastoral victims of a conspiracy hatched in the distance." Given the large-scale centralization of land ownership in America in the decades immediately following the agrarian revolt, one is persuaded that the land problems besetting Populists originated a bit closer to home. (See Appendix A.) Similarly, agrarian reservations about the practices of "the town clique"—doubts arising from banker and merchant hostility to the cooperative movement—are seen as providing evidence for Hofstadter's conclusion that Populists suffered from misplaced "anti-urban" manias. In the same vein, "the curiously ambiguous" disenchantment of Populists with the cause of international bimetallism is taken to signify a "nativist" hostility to "cooperation with European governments for any ends at all." Skepticism about the monetary rigidity and inadequacy of bimetallism—a Populistic premise widely shared by modern economists—seems an ambiguity to Hofstadter for the rather elementary reason that the greenback critique at the

* Hicks's role in denying Populists close association with their own movement is discussed at greater length on pp. 638–40, n. 8, 9, 10; and pp. 670–71, n. 15.

heart of Populism is far from the heart of his analysis. For venturesome and creative students of intellectual history such as Richard Hofstadter, the shadow movement of free silver provided a shaky perspective, indeed, from which to interpret Populism.¹

Similarly, Norman Pollack begins from premises laid down by Hicks and defends the silver crusade as "the last assertion of Populist radicalism." Since Populists were appalled by this particular assertion, Pollack cannot conveniently focus upon their understanding of agrarian purposes. And he does not.² While Hofstadter attacks Populism by emphasizing the ephemeral politics of William Jennings Bryan, Pollack defends the movement by defending the same man. Though Hofstadter easily has the best of this discussion, it seems prudent to remember that Bryan was not a Populist. As well as any other, this fact may suggest how far afield the whole matter has been carried. The cooperative dynamics that shaped the Omaha Platform and created the democratic ethos of Populism are not organic to either study.

There is, however, a noteworthy difference in the cultural implications each author draws from the agrarian revolt. On those occasions when Pollack focuses solely on the ideas of Populism, as distinct from specific political and cultural developments presumed to be associated with those ideas, his analysis of the constructive and egalitarian nature of the third party crusade, including its greenback premise, seems unarguable. At such times in *The Populist Response to Industrial America* the shadow movement recedes into the background and Populism emerges.³ If, on the other hand, in all pertinent interpretive passages concerning "Populism" in *The Age of Reform*, one substitutes the words "proponents of a metallic currency" for the word "Populist," the critique drawn by Richard Hofstadter of the provincialism of Gilded Age America becomes much more precise and persuasive. Such a substitution, of course, alters the meaning of the book at the level of its premise, for *The Age of Reform* then becomes a sweeping criticism of the culture of the corporate state rather than a sweeping criticism of Populism. The democratic rationality of both major parties would then necessarily fall prey to Hofstadterian skepticism. Unfortunately, the rather confined categories of political description available to Hofstadter within his culturally sanctioned intellectual tradition apparently made such an analysis very difficult to achieve.⁴

The narrow limits of Populism that materialize from the work of Hicks, Hofstadter, and Pollack have inevitably exerted a constraining influence on the scores of studies that have subsequently materialized on various aspects of the agrarian crusade. Because the centrality of the cooperative movement has not been understood, another relevant political dynamic has been missing—the pivotal role of what I have called "the politics of the sub-treasury" in combating sectionalism and turning rank and file Alliance farmers into rank and file third party radicals. Historians have found other causes for the presence or absence of Populism in the various regions of America. A kind of fragile economic determinism has prevailed, in the absence of handier explanations. Where strong third parties emerged, the cause has most

frequently been seen to have been "hard times." Where they did not, the weakness of reform was traceable to diversified farming leading to "good harvests" or, conversely, to temporary improvements in commodity prices resulting from "poor harvests." In the great mass of Populist literature, in short, the third party, like the Alliance, just "happened." As one author described the agrarian revolt, "Like Topsy, it just grew."⁵ Populism has simply not been seen as a political movement containing its own evolving democratic culture in which people could "see themselves" and, therefore, could dare to aspire for the kind of society conducive to mass human dignity.

When creative historians err, they err grandly; in sustaining a major book-length misreading of agrarian radicalism, the only serious rival to John Hicks and Richard Hofstadter is William Appleman Williams. While Hicks and Hofstadter mistook radical greenback anti-monopolists for pragmatic or nostalgic silverites, Williams chose to regard all farmers as a petit-bourgeois class. This view enabled him to link affluent Grangers, landless Alliancemen, place-hunting silverite politicians, and agrarian radicals in one massive potpourri of reaction. Indeed, in his study of foreign policy, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire* (1970), this farm "class" was more reactionary than an unsuspecting Gilded Age business community which, in Williams's view, was unwittingly pulled by the farmers into imperialist adventures overseas! The influential farmer spokesman who achieved this impressive feat included L. L. Polk and Charles Macune of the Alliance, Oliver H. Kelly of the National Grange, and William Jennings Bryan of the Democratic Party. Here again, the rigidities of certain sanctioned categories of political description, Marxist in this case, have simply overwhelmed the raw evidence of historical events. Yet, Williams is eclectic in his utilization of interpretive categories. In finding agrarians more threatening than he takes captains of finance and industry to be, Williams—once past his class analysis—seems to have been even more heavily influenced by Richard Hofstadter than he was by Karl Marx.

The Populist Movement in the United States by Anna Rochester (1943) broadly follows Hicks's description of the events of the agrarian revolt. To this foundation, Rochester ritualistically affixes a Leninist framework of analysis. The resulting edifice necessarily will not bear much weight. While Rochester's analysis is more or less ideologically consistent on its own terms, the People's Party she condescendingly portrays does not remotely resemble the one that existed. Another socialist, Matthew Josephson, analyzed Populism in the course of his broad study of the Gilded Age, *The Politicos* (1938). Considerably more enamored of democratic ideas than Rochester, Josephson was also much less patronizing toward the farmers. But, he, too, was unable to go much beyond Hicks and, therefore, failed to grasp the interior reality of the democratic mass movement that was Populism. Josephson, however, was not so beguiled that he failed to see the nomination of Bryan in 1896 as fatal to the agrarian cause. On balance, his account is better than most. In *American Radicalism, 1865-1901* (1946) Chester McArthur Destler's colorful portrait of the Populist-Socialist alliance in Chicago in 1894 is marred only

by the author's assumption, encouraged by Hick's portrait, that the Lloyd-Vincent-Darrow-Morgan coalition was a rare Populist specimen of popular democracy in action. For all its passion, the brief Chicago movement cannot be said to have surpassed in forethought or constancy either the far-flung cooperative crusade or scores of Populist campaigns across the South and West in the 1890s. But when dealing with the specific subject at hand, Destler's vivid account of urban Populism in Chicago is the finest local treatment of the movement in all of Populist literature.

Like their socialist counterparts, capitalist historians have tracked the findings of John Hicks, sometimes embellishing their accounts of the shadow movement with Hofstadterian flourishes and sometimes defending the silver episode in the style of Pollack. Stanley B. Parsons subjects the Nebraska silverites to quantification techniques in a recent work that is entitled, with unwitting irony, *The Populist Context* (1973). In *From Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (1969), Sheldon Hackney imposes upon rather imprecise and sometimes almost opaque legislative documents a heavy burden of ideological and political interpretation in the course of reaching conclusions in harmony with Hofstadter's. *The Climax of Populism* by Robert F. Durden (1966) is a sympathetic treatment of Marion Butler's harried tenure as third party custodian of the campaign for silver in 1896. Those of his conclusions that concern the efficacy of the silver drive accordingly coincide with Pollack's. In *Populist Vanguard* (1975), a study that emphasizes religious influences more than monetary analysis, Robert McMath finds a significant ingredient of agrarian organizing to be the "congenial social settings" in which the farmers met. In *Farmer Movements in the South* (1960), Theodore Saloutos intermittently observes the cooperative movement of the Alliance but does not see its defeat as a central event. Rather, the Farmers Alliance is "undermined" by the People's Party.

The intensely democratic "movement culture" of self-respect and aspiration generated by the cooperative crusade, a way of thinking that created the radical new third party of Populism, is not visible in any of these portraits.

In a theoretical sense, there is no absolutely compelling reason why either capitalist or socialist historians in America should be blocked off from perceiving a mass desire for social change as incubating in the particular way it did within the agrarian movement—even given the narrowness of the categories of political description dominant in both modes of analysis. Rather the problem has to do with what might be called the separate habits of thought undergirding the two intellectual traditions. In this operative sense, the idea of mass cultures of democracy being created as parallel institutions of self-respect and aspiration—or as "unsteeped places of worship" in E. P. Thompson's evocative phrase—is one that remains generally foreign to the traditions of either capitalist or socialist historical analysis, as these traditions have evolved in America.

Capitalist historians, generally starting from the unconscious premise that the country has always been a fairly effective democracy, have not imagined

a need for any of its citizens to establish parallel institutions where people could experiment in democratic forms.* So they have not inquired into the interior life of the cooperative crusade where, in thousands of suballiances, the political culture of American Populism came into being.

On the other hand, socialist historians, apparently overwhelmed psychologically by the near totality of their intellectual isolation in America, have seemingly been unable to imagine a mass popular movement in this country containing a decidedly anti-corporate center. So they have not looked either.

In both instances the initial failure of interpretation seems to have been more an absence of cultural poise and critical imagination than an organic insufficiency of theoretical weaponry that might be brought to bear. The narrowness of the inherited categories of political description, of course, has not helped either. In general, the works of capitalist historians seem to have suffered at least as much from their doctrinal complacency about capitalism as a synonym for democracy as the works of socialist historians have suffered from their cultural isolation. But socialists have demonstrated a complacent reliance on doctrine, too, as attested by the works of Williams, Rochester, and, to a lesser extent, Pollack.

Because the political basis of the national Populist movement has proven such a universal pitfall, several of the most interesting and substantial studies of Populism have been produced by cultural historians who were not primarily dealing with the third party's structural and political evolution. In relating what Populists said to what they did, such writers as O. Eugene Clanton and Walter T. K. Nugent, for example, have provided a much clearer picture of the third party movement in Kansas. Clanton's *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (1969) concludes that Populists were broadly progressive. Nugent, in his more sharply focused study, *The Tolerant Populists* (1963), investigates the day-to-day realities in the life of the third party in Kansas, tests all of Hofstadter's major findings, and finds them inapplicable. Nugent was doubtless aided in his inquiry by his familiarity with monetary issues. His study of post-Civil War financial struggles, *Money and American Society, 1865-1880* (1967), probes a number of the differences between greenbackers, silverites, and goldbugs. Robert Sharkey, is even more authoritative on financial matters in *Money, Class, and Party* (1959), but Irvin Unger's *The Greenback Era* (1964), proceeding from Hofstadterian premises, is much narrower and less useful in its description of greenback doctrines. Allan Weinstein's *Prelude to Populism* (1970) is a careful study of the first

* Indeed, among behaviorists who seem to take as their starting point the received presumptions of the prevailing culture, such popular democratic actions, should they somehow occur, are seen as "dysfunctional" to the social order and point to some neurotic affliction on the part of the participants. (See Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior*, 1963). It is impossible to take this fragile and culturally confined school of analysis seriously, though, one observes, a considerable number of American psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists seem earnestly to be trying to do so. Its most beguiling and artful practitioner, however, has been a historian—Richard Hofstadter. As they have traditionally written, the disciples of the behaviorist school may be counted on to survive and prosper because their efforts tend to provide a comforting rationalization for things as they are. They thus can be expected to continue to enjoy powerful cultural sanction.

silver drive of the 1870s, but the author unfortunately relates money to late nineteenth-century politics in ways reflecting the influence of John Hicks. This impediment vitiates a good deal of the political meaning of his study.

Given the mass democratic movement at the heart of the agrarian revolt, Populism offers a fertile field for future inquiries by social and political historians. Much can be learned about the social realities and political power relationships within nineteenth-century American society through studies of the day-to-day life of the cooperative crusade in each of the states touched by the Alliance lecturing campaigns of 1887-91. Such inquiries will also tell us much more about the Alliance movement in each state than we now know. The particulars through which the ideological culmination of the cooperative effort—the “politics of the sub-treasury”—either were or were not orchestrated through the lecturing system of each state Alliance should illuminate the specific organizational dynamics leading both to strong and to weak state-level third parties across America in 1892. Such particulars will tell us much more about the People's Party in each state than we now know. Though the existing monographic literature is vast, it does not address these matters.

Beyond these political questions about the Alliance and the People's Party lie deeper questions for the social historian. How did the first fragile efforts toward cooperation at the local level—election of suballiance business agents and the creation of county trade committees to bargain with merchants—affect the average farmer caught in the crop lien or the chattel mortgage? If the cooperative crusade raised political consciousness to a level seldom since attained by large numbers of Americans, how, precisely, did this occur? What raised the sights of people more—cooperative success or cooperative defeat? Was the acceptance of the sub-treasury solution, and of greenback doctrines generally, largely a matter of faith and shared allegiance to one's cooperative brothers and sisters in the Alliance, and to one's lecturers, or was it more than this? To summarize, in ways that are more precise than those elaborated in this study, how did the people of Populism acquire the self-confidence to create a new party to challenge the received political culture? One has only to ponder the difficulty facing would-be third party organizers in modern America to perceive the full meaning of the Alliance political achievement in fashioning the People's Party of the 1890s. In one way, at least, the task facing the agrarian reformers was even more arduous, for they had to generate enormous popular momentum in order to break the sectional bonds of Civil War loyalties.

In addition to these questions about the Populists are larger ones that go to the structure of power and privilege in America. Among the higher priorities, the economic, political, and social ramifications of American banking practices, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, stand as a singularly neglected area of investigation, one affecting hundreds of millions of Americans, past and present. The long-standard works on the origins and development of the Federal Reserve System have emanated from the pens of gold-standard apostles who wrote the Federal Reserve Act—J. Laurence

Laughlin, H. Parker Willis, and Paul Warburg. (See p. 686, n. 3); Similarly, the most comprehensive studies of American banking in historical literature are by Bray Hammond, an employee of "The Fed." This material can scarcely be said to constitute a probing or balanced body of evidence. *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867-1960* by economists Milton Friedman and Anna Schwartz (1963) approaches the politics of money with extreme circumspection, leaving many central issues untouched. *Money* by John Kenneth Galbraith (1975) is urbane skeptical of a number of sanctioned assumptions and institutions—from the values and intelligence of American bankers to the economic utility of the Federal Reserve System—but the author makes no sustained effort to formulate broadly applicable alternatives. The subjects of money and banking, in their meaning as social and political realities as well as arcane financial topics, do not seem to be in immediate danger of being overworked by American scholars. Since Populism, serious and full-scale appraisals of the monetary system have not been attempted. A beginning, however, has been made with respect to the helplessness of Congress. *The Money Committees* by Lester Salamon (1975) probes the adverse impact of the banking system and banker lobbying on, among other things, the housing aspirations of millions of Americans.

Biographers could profitably supplement the five worthy studies of Populist leaders now available: C. Vann Woodward's *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (2nd edition, 1973); Chester McArthur Destler's *Henry Demarest Lloyd and the Empire of Reform* (1963); Martin Ridge's *Ignatius Donnelly: The Portrait of a Politician* (1962); Stuart Noblin's *Leonidas Lafayette Polk: Agrarian Crusader* (1949), and Michael J. Brodhead's *Persevering Populist: The Life of Frank Doster* (1969). Charles Macune of Texas and Henry Vincent of Kansas are the most obvious subjects for investigation. The known historical sources may be too thin for well-rounded biographies of other Populists who come to mind, Henry Loucks of South Dakota, William Lamb and John Rayner of Texas, and W. Scott Morgan of Arkansas, but this may not be the case for L. H. Weller of Iowa, Milford Howard of Alabama, Stephen McLallin of Kansas, Frank Burkitt of Mississippi, and Tom Nugent of Texas. Most of these men, in addition to their other roles, were reform editors. The Reform Press was to the People's Party what the lecturing system was to the National Alliance—the critical internal communications network within the movement culture. A most remarkable group of Americans, the reform editors stand in need of full-scale scholarly investigation. In the meantime, one regional study, "The Reform Editors and Their Press," by Seymour Lutzky, a long-unpublished dissertation on the Populist editors in the West, merits publication.

Finally, one senses that women played a more prominent role in the agrarian revolt than the present study suggests. The evidence is both tantalizing in implication and difficult to gather. Suggested points of entry: the careers of Annie Diggs of Kansas, Sophronia Lewelling of Oregon, Bettie Gay of Texas, Luna Kellie of Nebraska, Ella Knowles of Montana, Sophia Harden of South Dakota, and of course, the author of the famous injunc-

tion to farmers to "raise less corn and more hell," Mary Elizabeth Lease of Kansas. Luna Kellie's epitaph for Populism suggests the depth of her personal involvement: "I dared not even think of all the hopes we used to have and their bitter ending . . . and so I never vote."

Of the existing monographic literature, the best single state study of Populism remains A. M. Arnett's *The Populist Movement in Georgia* (1922), written before later interpretive constraints were fashioned. Four recent studies are also of merit. In *One-Gallused Rebellion: Agrarianism in Alabama, 1865-1896*, by William Warren Rogers (1970), a work based on extensive use of primary sources, Alliance-Populism emerges as authentic human striving; and in *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest* by William Ivy Hair (1969), the third party's checkered struggle against the inheritance of white supremacy in Louisiana is delineated. *Urban Populism and Free Silver in Montana*, by Thomas Clinch (1970), is a careful study in a state where Populism was a labor movement. The grab-bag nature of the silver crusade is clearly visible in Mary Ellen Glass's *Silver and Politics in Nevada: 1892-1902* (1969). An older study by a political scientist, Roscoe Martin's *The People's Party in Texas* (1933), is also useful, though Martin appears unaware of the national organizing role played by the same reformers whose efforts he so aptly describes on the state level—a circumstance perhaps evolving from the author's decision to take the fading months of 1891 as the starting point for his research. *Populism and Politics*, by Peter H. Argesinger (1974) is excellent on the machinations of the fusionists in Kansas but less so when the author, basing his work primarily on Kansas sources, attempts to interpret the movement beyond that state's borders.

Overall, the best guides to the national Populist experience remain the Populists themselves. Two thoughtful collections of agrarian thought are available: *The Populist Mind* by Norman Pollack (1967), and *A Populist Reader* by George Tindall (1966). Also useful is "The Rhetoric of Southern Populists: Metaphor and Imagery in the Language of Reform," by Bruce Palmer, a recently completed and as yet unpublished dissertation. For those who want more of the Populists in unvarnished form, the depression year of 1894 brought forth Henry Demarest Lloyd's anti-monopoly classic, *Wealth Against Commonwealth*; Henry Vincent's deeply sympathetic account of the plight of the unemployed, *The Story of the Commonweal*, and, for those who can take a combination of full-blown Populist rhetoric blended with a thoughtful investigation of the monetary system, there is James H. "Cyclone" Davis's *A Political Revelation*, containing a lengthy supplement on the Sub-Treasury System by Harry Tracy (see Appendix B).

Some excellent works by specialists bear directly on the issues of Populism. Hans Birger Thorelli, explores the rise of oligopoly in his monumental study, *The Federal Anti-trust Policy: Organization of an American Tradition* (1955). With the essential legal flanks safeguarded, the movement toward corporate concentration continued unimpeded into the modern era, as Ralph L. Nelson shows in *The Merger Movement in American Industry, 1895-1956* (1957). While the Justice Department was losing its battle to cope

with the combination movement, the Interstate Commerce Commission met a corresponding fate at the hands of American railroads, a process detailed in Gabriel Kolko's *Railroads and Regulation, 1877-1916* (1965). *Triumph of Conservatism* (1963), by the same author, traces the similar accommodations to large-scale manufacturers, merchandisers, and processors by the Federal Trade Commission and to Eastern commercial banks by the Federal Reserve System. The social impact of the emerging corporate state is brilliantly interpreted in *Work, Culture, and Society in 19th Century America*, by Herbert Gutman (1975).

In the presence of consolidating corporate power, the fragility of the American labor movement is visible in Norman J. Ware's old but still useful study of the Knights of Labor, *The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895* (1929). The analogous plight of Southern farmers under the crop lien system is effectively portrayed by Harold Woodman in *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925* (1968). However, in a work that treats the problem of agricultural credit in the Western granary, *Money at Interest* (1955), Allan Bogue engages in a somewhat strained defense of the policies of mortgage companies. The matter of tenancy and land centralization in the plains states in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can bear some more attention. A relevant body of evidence is available in Fred A. Shannon, "The Status of the Midwestern Farmer in 1900," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (December 1950), 491-510. In a recent study, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (1972), Pete Daniel has provided a valuable example of what can be achieved on a most relevant and long-neglected subject. The conservative rationale for rural poverty—that farmers brought their troubles on themselves through "overproduction"—is effectively debunked by two economists, an economic historian and a historian, respectively: Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, "The 'Lock-in' Mechanism and Cotton Overproduction in the Postbellum South," *Agricultural History* (April 1973), 405-22; Stephen DeCanio, "Cotton 'Overproduction' in Late Nineteenth Century Southern Agriculture," *Journal of Economic History* (Sept. 1973), 608-33; and Thomas D. Clark, "The Furnishing and Supply System in Southern Agriculture since 1865," *Journal of Southern History* (Feb. 1946), 24-44. The historical record of the cooperative idea is presented in *The Rise of American Cooperative Enterprise* (1969) by Joseph Knapp.

The passing of the People's Party in America left the way clear in the South for the achievement of political hegemony by businessmen. In *The Shaping of Southern Politics* (1974), an effectively documented work that probes the process by which a white supremacist, business-dominated "Solid South" was constructed, J. Morgan Kousser traces the near-total disfranchisement of blacks and the partial disfranchisement of low income whites. The new edifice of politics was fully completed by 1910. The same forces were at work nationally, a process that is often visible in *The American Party Systems*, edited by William N. Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham. Should any future historian harbor Hofstadterian doubts that the grievances of

Populists and the objectives of the Omaha Platform were real, the work of these specialists may give him pause.

Finally, the unique contribution of C. Vann Woodward merits special mention. While concerned with a larger topic, Woodward's classic study of the post-Reconstruction South, *Origins of the New South* (1951), is laden with insights about the political evolution and cultural implications of Southern Populism. The chief limitation of Woodward's analysis is traceable to the regional scope that was a product of his larger purpose—which was not to write about the agrarian revolt in the nation but to write about the American South in the Gilded Age. Woodward's essential cultural statement about Southern Populism, that it was demonstrably more humanistic than its political rivals, applies to American Populism. His essential political statement about Southern Populists, that they were "midroaders," also, of course, applies to the national movement. Despite a number of impediments in the secondary literature relating to the origins of the cooperative movement and the evolution of Alliance monetary theory, Woodward, while not locating the centrality of cooperation or the movement culture it created, drew attention to the Alliance lecturing system and the National Reform Press Association developed by agrarian strategists as necessary educational corollaries of their organizing campaign. Accordingly, he had little difficulty in outlining the structure of Populist economic reform and the corresponding ephemerality of the silver issue. In short, in economic as well as political terms, Woodward wrote about Populism as Populism, rather than as the fusion politics of free silver. And, of course, Woodward's magnificent biography of the tortured life of Tom Watson is one of the enduring triumphs of American historical literature and, indeed, of American letters.

After over a half-century of research on America's largest mass movement of the nineteenth century, the original question remains: what does the Populist experience reveal about the evolution of political and economic power in industrial America?

One is persuaded that it reveals a great deal. As for the style of the nation's emerging financial elite, one cannot easily find a political doctrine narrower and more self-serving than the fixation of the American banking hierarchy upon "sound money." Leaving aside the piety about "the sanctity of contracts" and "the nation's honor," the artificially contracted currency of the gold standard had three undeniable and linked products: it curtailed the nation's economic growth; it helped measurably to concentrate the capital assets of the nation in the pockets of the nation's bankers; * and it helped measurably to consign generation after generation of non-banker Americans to lives of hardship and dependence. Beyond this, the triumph of the

* Though—because of the prevailing legalities of the situation—it is impossible to construct an accurate picture of bank ownership in America, there is some evidence to suggest that many and perhaps most Southern banks chartered in the period 1880-1940 were capitalized by furnishing merchants. But in general, serious scholarly work in this area has not yet begun—and cannot—until the disclosure laws are reformed (see Appendix A).

political and cultural values embedded in the gold standard provided the economic foundation for the hierarchical corporate state of twentieth century America. In turn, the values and the sheer power of corporate America today pinch in the horizons of millions of obsequious corporate employees, tower over every American legislature, state and national, determine the modes and style of mass communications and mass education, fashion American foreign policy around the globe, and shape the rules of the American political process itself. The scope of intimidation extends deep into the American academy and into the very core of American intellectual life. Perhaps nothing illustrates the subtle power of the received culture more tellingly than the paucity of serious inquiry—by economists, historians, and political scientists—into the economic and political substance of that central component of American capitalism—commercial banking. Self-evidently, corporate values define modern American culture.

It was the corporate state that the People's Party attempted to bring under democratic control. The sheer scope of that goal measures the intensity of the parallel culture of mass self-respect and human aspiration generated by the agrarian revolt. At bottom, that culture expressed the democratic promise that was the ultimate meaning of Populism in America.

The long inability of Americans encased in "the progressive society" to comprehend the agrarian revolt may be taken as a fairly instructive index of the social relevance of modern political thought, sadly confined as it is by the ubiquitous ethos of the corporate state. The victims of modern culture have tried to view their personal resignation and intellectual submission as a form of sophistication and have attempted to sustain their morale by teaching the young not to aspire too grandly for too much democracy. In America the two political names for this narrowed despair are liberalism and conservatism. The language of one is grounded in civic illusion, the other in self-interested complacency. The Gilded Age silverites and goldbugs were the immediate progenitors of each; indeed, their tangential "Battle of the Standards" in 1896 turned out to be a foretaste of much of electoral politics in twentieth-century America.

But the Omaha Platform was generated by other Americans who were not so culturally organized or so politically cowed. It may be that the Populists have never been made a seminal part of the national heritage because to do so would diminish the present, and the people who live in it, too profoundly. It would be difficult, indeed, for the implicit comparison to coexist easily with the sundry ideas of progress so necessary to the political morale of twentieth-century people. Today, a loyal but disenchanted citizenry, aware that it can do little to affect "politics," endeavors to take what solace it can from the pursuit of material goods.

But, though Americans consume more products today, they are less free than they used to be; and in the privacy of their minds, they suspect it. It is essentially a matter of scale of thought, or more precisely, of scale of aspiration. Our hopes have become cramped; our achievements necessarily have also. It is not, however, a uniquely American phenomenon. The modern

cultures of mass resignation and privatism verify this unhappy truth—in the United States, in the Soviet Union, in the industrial world. Though the distinctions from country to country in the degree of relative resignation and relative liberty are quite important, everywhere the self-perpetuating structures of capitalism and communism have placed themselves beyond effective democratic change. In both camps the citizenry does not seem to be able to alter significantly the essential patterns of power and privilege. It is the one political reality that binds the people of the "advanced industrial world."

In the singularly uncreative political environment of the twentieth century, an environment that locks billions of people into rigid theoretical categories conceived by capitalist and socialist prophets now long dead, men and women are in danger of unconsciously relinquishing the broad democratic dreams that quickened mankind's speculative energies through the preceding 400 years. Individually diminished by the social demands of large-scale technology and the constricting cultures it has nurtured, the peoples of the industrial world find it increasingly difficult to develop genuinely democratic ways to cooperate with each other. To do so, they need to participate in self-generated democratic forms, but we seem to have few contemporary suballiances where individual political self-confidence can be encouraged and where collective democratic hopes can take life. The intense psychological isolation of the great mass of people in industrialized societies may be seen to constitute the essential rigidifying factor in twentieth century political regimes. With the political self-confidence of individual people and the collective idea of "the rights of the people" varyingly curtailed by large-scale corporate cultures and by large-scale state cultures, both ideologically sanctified, it has become increasingly difficult for the citizenry to find a coherent way to aspire for greater human freedom. This development would be much more widely understood were it not for the fact that—for reasons most members of modern societies have chosen not to ponder too much—the people of the industrial world are losing their capacity to think in germane ways about their own personal autonomy or their own political self-respect.

In America, part of the difficulty lies in our complacent understanding of our own heritage. It is by no means a heritage of utter failure, but it is also in no sense one of uninterrupted democratic triumph. Once we find the national poise to cease our culturally undifferentiated celebration of the American past, the poise, therefore, to confront the sources both of white resignation and of black anguish, the promise of democracy will once again become a possibility in the lives of Americans. At such a moment, and one believes it may come, the Populist heritage will be useful. For above all else, the men and women who filled the Alliance wagon trains and the Populist summer encampments, and those who set out on arduous journeys to talk to black sharecroppers and to white tenants—such people believed in the promise of the democratic idea. They dared to aspire grandly in behalf of their vision of human possibility.

When Americans can generate the individual sense of self and an ethos of

collective hope necessary to understand them, the words of Populism can, for the first time, become part of the democratic poetry of the common heritage. But for this to happen, the narrowly focused and defensive sophistication of modern culture must give way to self-respect. Though the people's culture created by the agrarian revolt was deeply embattled and too new ever to be more than fragile, the Americans who participated in it came to possess, for a time, that very quality—unintimidated self-respect. It is the one essential ingredient of an authentic mass democracy. No industrial society in the world has yet attained it.

The agrarian revolt therefore is something more than a democratic memory; from the moment of its conception, it concerned the future. The prophetic words of S. O. Daws in 1886 describe the legacy of the agrarian reformers and suggest the challenge facing those who live in the twentieth century: "If the Alliance is destroyed, it will be some time before the people have confidence in themselves, and one another, to revive it, or organize anything new."