

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. These sources, along with rural weeklies, 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.

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 *The Age of Reform*, and its most ardent defense, Norman Pollack *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. 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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

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, historians have found other causes for the presence or absence of Populism in the various regions of America. 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." Populism has simply not been seen as a political movement containing its own evolving democratic organization, capable of constructing a mass schoolroom of ideology and a mass culture of self-respect.

Historians of socialist persuasion have encountered similar problems. *The Populist Movement in the United States* by Anna Rochester (1943) broadly follows Hicks's description of the events of the agrarian revolt, as does Matthew Josephson, who analyzed Populism in the course of his broad study of the Gilded Age, *The Politicos* (1938). In at least one instance, a sophisticated and tightly focused local perspective has largely succeeded in skirting Hicksian conceptual limitations: *American Radicalism, 1865-1901* (1946), Chester McArthur Destler's colorful portrait of the Populist-Socialist alliance in Chicago in 1894. It 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 entitled *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. *The Climax of Populism* by Robert F. Durden (1966) is a sympathetic treatment of Marion Butter'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.

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 *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*

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 *The Greenback Era* (1964), proceeding from Hofstadterian premises, is much narrower and less useful in its description of greenback doctrines. Allan Weinstein *Prelude to Populism* (1970) is a careful study of the first silver drive of the 1870s, but the author unfortunately relates money to late nineteenth-century politics in ways reflecting the influence of John Hicks.

Five worthy biographies of Populist leaders are now available: C. Vann Woodward *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (2nd edition, 1973); Chester McArthur Destler *Henry Demarest Lloyd and the Empire of Reform* (1963); Martin Ridge *Ignatius Donnell: The Portrait of a Politician* (1962); Stuart Noblin *Leonidas Lafayette Polk: Agrarian Crusader* (1949), and Michael J. Brodhead *Persevering Populist: The Life of Frank Doster* (1969).

Gilded Age society, marking as it does the beginnings of modern corporate America, offers a fertile field for research on 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. 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 urbanely 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 fullscale 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 (1974) probes the adverse impact of the banking system and banker lobbying on, among other things, the housing aspirations of millions of Americans.

One also 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 injunction 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 *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 *Silver and Politics in Nevada: 1892-1902* (1969).