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A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America

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Introduction

This book is about the flowering of the largest democratic mass movement in American history. It is also necessarily a book about democracy itself. Finally it is about why Americans have far less democracy than they like to think and what would have to happen to alter that situation. The passionate events that are the subject of this book had their origins in the social circumstances a hundred years ago when the American population contained huge masses of farmers. A large number of people in the United States discovered that the economic premises of their society were working against them. These premises were reputed to be democratic — America after all was a democratic society in the eyes of most of its own citizens and in the eyes of the world — but farmers by the millions found that this claim was not supported by the events governing their lives. The nation's agriculturalists had worried and grumbled about "the new rules of commerce" ever since the prosperity that accompanied the Civil War had turned into widespread distress soon after the war ended. During the 1870's they did the kinds of things that concerned people generally do in an effort to cope with "hard times." In an occupation noted for hard work they worked even harder. When that failed to change things millions of families migrated westward in an effort to enlist nature's help. They were driven by the thought that through sheer physical labor they might wring more production from the new virgin lands of the West than they had been able to do in their native states of Ohio and Virginia and Alabama. But, though railroad land agents created beguiling stories of Western prosperity, the men and women who listened, and went, found that the laws of commerce worked against them just as much in Kansas and Texas as they had back home on the eastern side of the Mississippi River. So in the 1870's, the farmers increasingly talked to each other about their troubles and read books on economics in an effort to discover what had gone wrong. Some of them formed organizations of economic self-help like the Grange and others assisted in pioneering new institutions of political self-help like the Greenback Party. But as the hard times of the 1870's turned into the even harder times of the 1880's, it was clear that these efforts were not really going anywhere. Indeed, by 1888 it was evident that things were worse than they had been in 1878 or 1868. More and more people saw their farm mortgages foreclosed. As everyone in rural America knew, this statistic inexorably yielded to another, more ominous one: the number of landless tenant farmers in America rose steadily year after year. Meanwhile, millions of small landowners hung on grimly, their unpaid debts thrusting them dangerously close to the brink of tenantry and peonage. Hard work availed nothing. Everywhere the explanation of events was the same: "Times were hard." Then gradually, in certain specific ways and for certain specific reasons, American farmers developed new methods that enabled them to try to regain a measure of control over their own lives. Their efforts, halting and disjointed at first, gathered form and force until they grew into a coordinated mass movement that stretched across the American continent from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific. Millions of people came to believe fervently that a wholesale overhauling of their society was going to happen in their lifetimes. A democratic "new day" was coming to America. This whirlwind of effort, and the massive upsurge of democratic hopes that accompanied it, has come to be known as the Populist Revolt. This book is about that moment of historical time. It seeks to trace the planting, growth, and death of the mass democratic movement known as Populism. For a number of reasons, all of them rather fundamental to historical analysis, the Populist moment has proved very difficult for Americans to understand. Under the circumstances, it is probably just

well to take these reasons up one at a time at the very outset in an effort to clear away as much underbrush as possible before turning our attention to the protesting farmers of the 1890's.

There are three principal areas of interpretive confusion that bear directly on the Populist experience. First, very little understanding exists as to just what mass democratic movements are, and how they happen. Second, there are serious problems embedded in the very language of description modern Americans routinely employ to characterize political events. These problems particularly affect commonly held presumptions about how certain "classes" of people are supposed to "act" on the stage of history. Finally, and by all odds most importantly, our greatest problem in understanding protest is grounded in contemporary American culture. In addition to being central, this cultural difficulty is also the most resistant to clear explanation: we are not only culturally confused, our confusion makes it difficult for us even to imagine our confusion. Obviously, it is prudent, then, to start here.

The reigning American presumption about the American experience is grounded in the idea of progress, the conviction that the present is "better" than the past and the future will bring still more betterment. This reassuring belief rests securely on statistical charts and tables certifying the steady upward tilt in economic production. Admittedly, social problems have persisted — inequities of income and opportunity have plagued the society — but these, too, have steadily been addressed through the sheer growth of the economy. For all of its shortcomings, the system works.

This is a powerful assumption. It may be tested by reflecting upon the fact that, despite American progress, the society has been forced to endure sundry movements of protest. In our effort to address the inconvenient topic of protest, our need to be intellectually consistent — while thinking within the framework of continuous progress — has produced a number of explanations about the nature of dissent in America. Closely followed, these arguments are not really explanations at all, but rather the assertion of more presumptions that have the effect of defending the basic intuition about progress itself. The most common of these explanations rests upon what is perceived to be a temporary malfunction of the economic order: people protest when "times are hard." When times stop being "hard," people stop protesting and things return to "normal" — that is to say, progress is resumed. (*)

Unfortunately, history does not support the notion that mass protest movements develop because of hard times. Depressed economies or exploitive arrangements of power and privilege may produce lean years or even lean lifetimes for millions of people, but the historical evidence is conclusive that they do not produce mass political insurgency. The simple fact of the matter is that, in ways that affect mind and body, times have been "hard" for most humans throughout human history and for most of that period people have not been in rebellion. Indeed, traditionalists in a number of societies have often pointed in glee to this passivity, choosing to call it "apathy" and citing it as a justification for maintaining things as they are.

This apparent absence of popular vigor is traceable, however, not to apathy but to the very real materials of history — that complex of rules, manners, power relationships, and memories that collectively comprise what is called culture. "The masses" do not rebel in instinctive response to hard times and exploitation because they have been culturally organized by their societies not to rebel. They have, instead, been instructed in deference. Needless to say, this is the kind of social circumstance that is not readily apparent to the millions who live within it.

The lack of visible mass political activity on the part of modern industrial populations is a function of how these societies have been shaped by the various economic or political elites who fashioned them. In fundamental ways, this shaping process (which is now quite mature in America) bears directly not only upon our ability to grasp the meaning of American Populism, but our ability to understand protest generally and, most important of all, on our ability to comprehend the prerequisites for democracy itself. This shaping process, therefore, merits some attention.

Upon the consolidation of power, the first duty of revolutionaries (whether of the "bourgeois" or

“proletarian” variety) is obviously to try to deflect any further revolutions that necessarily would be directed against them. Though a strong central police or army has sometimes proved essential to the stabilizing process, revolutionaries, like other humans, do not yearn to spend their lives fighting down counterrevolutions. A far more permanent and thus far more desirable solution to the task of achieving domestic tranquillity is cultural — the creation of mass modes of thought that literally make the need for major additional social changes difficult for the mass of the population to imagine. When and if achieved, these conforming modes of thought and conduct constitute the new culture itself. The ultimate victory is nailed into place, therefore, only when the population has been persuaded to define all conceivable political activity within the limits of existing custom. Such a society can genuinely be described as “stable.” Thenceforth, protest will pose no ultimate threat because the protesters will necessarily conceive of their options as being so limited that even should they be successful, the resulting “reforms” will not alter significantly the inherited modes of power and privilege. Protest under such conditions of cultural narrowness is, therefore, not only permissible in the eyes of those who rule, but is, from time to time, positively desirable because it fortifies the popular understanding that the society is functioning “democratically.” Though for millions of Americans the fact is beyond imagining, such cultural dynamics describe politics in contemporary America. It is one of the purposes of this book to trace how this happened.

It can be said, in advance of the evidence, that this condition of social constraint is by no means solely an American one; it is worldwide and traceable to a common source: the Industrial Revolution. Over the last eight generations, increasingly sophisticated systems of economic organization have developed throughout the western world, spawning factories and factory towns and new forms of corporate centralization and corporate politics. Through these generations of the modern era, millions have been levered off the land and into cities to provide the human components of the age of machinery. Meanwhile, ownership of both industrial and agricultural land has been increasingly centralized. Yet, though these events have caused massive dislocations of family, habitat, and work, creating mass suffering in many societies and anxiety in all of them, mass movements of protest have rarely materialized. This historical constant points to a deeper reality of the modern world: industrial societies have not only become centralized, they have devised rules of conduct that are intimidating to their populations as a whole. Though varying in intensity in important ways from nation to nation, this has now happened everywhere — whether a particular society regards itself as “socialist” or “capitalist.” When people discover that their intellectual autonomy has become severely circumscribed and their creativity forcibly channeled into acceptable non-political modes of expression (a not unfrequent circumstance in socialist systems of economic organization), they are told that their autonomous hungers are “decadent,” “individualistic,” and, if obstinately pursued, will be seen as “revisionist” and “counterrevolutionary” in intent. On the other hand, when people discover they have far fewer opportunities than others of their countrymen (a not infrequent circumstance in capitalist systems of economic organization), they are told — as Populists were told in the 1890’s and as blacks, Appalachian whites, and migrant laborers are told today in America — that they are “improvident,” “lazy,” inherently “deprived,” or in some similar fashion culturally handicapped and at fault. These stigmas (which in earlier times were also visited upon Irish, Jewish, Italian, and other immigrants to America) generate fears; people are driven to undergo considerable indignity to earn sufficient status to avoid them. Accordingly, they try to do those things necessary to “get ahead.” The result is visible in the obsequious day-to-day lives of white-collar corporate employees in America — and in the even more obsequious lives of Communist Party functionaries in the Soviet Union. Though life clearly contains far more options in America than in Russia, the persistence of these varying modes of mass deference in both countries illuminate the social limits of democratic forms in modern industrial societies generally. It is interesting to observe that each of the aforementioned adjective

from “counterrevolutionary” to “lazy,” is offered in the name of preserving corporate or state culture self-described as “democratic.” It is clear that the varied methods of social control fashioned in industrial societies have, over time, become sufficiently pervasive and subtle that a gradual erosion of democratic aspirations among whole populations has taken place. Accordingly, it is evident that the precise meaning of the word “democracy” has become increasingly obscure as industrialization has proceeded. It is appropriate to attempt to pursue the matter — for problems inherent in defining democracy underscore the cultural crisis of modern life around the globe.

In America, an important juncture in the political consolidation of the industrial culture came some four generations ago, at the culmination of the Populist moment in the 1890’s. Because the decline of popular democratic aspiration since then has involved an absence of something rather than a visible presence, it has materialized in ways that are largely unseen. Politically, the form exists today primarily as a mass folkway of resignation, one that has become increasingly visible since the end of World War II. People do not believe they can do much “in politics” to affect substantively either their own daily lives or the inherited patterns of power and privilege within their society. Nothing illustrates the general truth of this phenomenon more than the most recent exception to it, namely the conduct of the student radicals of the 1960’s. While the students themselves clearly felt they could substantively affect “inherited patterns of power and privilege,” the prevailing judgment of the 1970’s, shared by both the radicals and their conservative critics, is that the students were naïve to have had such sweeping hopes. Today, political life in America has once more returned to normal levels of resignation.

Again, the folkway is scarcely an American monopoly. In diverse forms, popular resignation is visible from Illinois to the Ukraine. It does more than measure a sense of impotence among masses of people; it has engendered escapist modes of private conduct that focus upon material acquisition. The young of both societies seek to “plug in” to the system, the better to reap private rewards. Public life is much lower on the scale of priorities. Indeed, the disappearance of a visible public ethic and sense of commonweal has become the subject of handwringing editorials in publications as diverse as the *Chicago Tribune* in the United States and *Izvestia* in the Soviet Union. The retreat of the Russian populace represents a simple acknowledgment of ruthless state power. Deference is an essential ingredient of personal survival. In America, on the other hand, mass resignation represents a public manifestation of a private loss, a decline in what people think they have a political right to aspire to — in essence, a decline of individual political self-respect on the part of millions of people.

The principal hazard to a clear understanding of the meaning of American Populism exists in the central anomaly of contemporary American culture. Reform movements such as Populism necessarily call into question the underlying values of the larger society. But if that society is perceived by its members to be progressive and democratic — and yet is also known to have resisted the movement for democratic reform — the reigning cultural presumption necessarily induces people to place the “blame” for the failure of protest upon the protesters themselves. Accordingly, in the case of the Populists, the mainstream presumption is both simple and largely unconscious: one studies Populism to learn where the Populists went wrong. The condescension toward the past that is implicit in the idea of progress merely reinforces such complacent premises.

Further, if the population is politically resigned (believing the dogma of “democracy” on a superficial public level but not believing it privately) it becomes quite difficult for people to grasp the scope of popular hopes that were alive in an earlier time when democratic expectations were larger than those people permit themselves to have today. By conjoining these two contradictory features of modern culture — the assumption of economic progress with massive political resignation — it is at once evident that modern people are culturally programmed, as it were, to conclude that past American egalitarians such as the Populists were “foolish” to have had such large democratic hopes. Again, or

“progressive” impulse to condescend to the past merely reinforces such a presumption. In a society which sophisticated deference masks private resignation, the democratic dreams of the Populists have been difficult for twentieth-century people to imagine. Contemporary American culture itself therefore operates to obscure the Populist experience.

A second obstacle to a clear perception of Populism is embedded in the language of description through which contemporary Americans attempt to characterize “politics.” A central interpretive tool derived from Marx but almost universally employed today by Marxists and non-Marxists alike, based upon concepts of class: that is, that the intricate nature of social interaction in history can be rendered more intelligible by an understanding of the mode and extent of class conflict that was or was not at work during a given period. Needless to say, many psychological, social, and economic ingredients are embedded in concepts of class, and, when handled with care, they can, indeed, bring considerable clarity to historical events of great complexity. Nevertheless, as an interpretive device “class” is a treacherous tool if handled casually and routinely — as it frequently is. For example, offhand “class analysis,” when applied to the agrarian revolt in America, will merely succeed in rendering the Populist experience invisible. While classes in agricultural societies contain various shadings of “property-consciousness” on the part of rich landowners, smallholders, and landless laborers (“gentry,” “farmers,” and “tenants,” in American terminology), these distinctions create more problems than they solve when applied to the agrarian revolt. It is a long-standing assumption — not so thoroughly tested in America by sustained historical investigation as some might believe — that “landowners” must perforce behave in politically reactionary ways. The political aspirations of the landless are seen to deserve intense scrutiny, but the politics of “the landed” cannot be expected to contain serious progressive ideas. The power of this theoretical assumption can scarcely be understated. It permits the political efforts of millions of human beings to be dismissed with the casual flourish of an abstract category of interpretation. One can only assert the conviction that the thoroughgoing history of, for example, the Socialist Party of the United States, including the history of the recruitment of its agrarian following in early twentieth-century America, will not be fully pieced together until this category of political analysis is successfully transcended. The condition of being “landed” or “landless” does not, *à priori*, predetermine one’s potential for “progressive” political action: circumstances surrounding the ownership or non-ownership of land are central and relevant, too. The Populist experience in any case puts this proposition to a direct and precise test, for the agrarian movement was created by landed and landless people. The platform of the movement argued in behalf of the landless because that platform was seen as being progressive for small landowners, too. Indeed, from beginning to end, the chief Populist theoreticians — “landowners” as well — stood in economic terms with the propertyless rural and urban people of America.

In consequence, neither the human experiences within the mass institutions generated by the agrarian revolt nor the ideology of Populism itself can be expected to become readily discernible to anyone, capitalist or Marxist, who is easily consoled by the presumed analytical clarity of categories of class. The interior life of the agrarian revolt makes this clear enough.^(*) While the economic and political threads of populism did not always mesh in easy harmony (any more than the cultural threads did), the evolution of the political ideology of the movement proceeded from a common center and a common experience and thus possessed an instructive degree of sequential consistency.^(†)

The use of the word “sequential” provides an appropriate introduction to the final hazard confronting the student of the agrarian revolt — the rather elementary problem of defining just what “mass movements” are and how they happen. The sober fact is that movements of mass democratic protest — that is to say, coordinated insurgent actions by hundreds of thousands or millions of people — represent a political, an organizational, and above all, a cultural achievement of the first magnitude. Beyond this, mass protest requires a high order not only of cultural education and tactical

achievement, it requires a high order of *sequential* achievement. These evolving stages of achievement are essential if large numbers of intimidated people are to generate both the psychological autonomy and the practical means to challenge culturally sanctioned authority. Failure at any stage of the sequential process aborts or at the very least sharply limits the growth of the popular movement. Unfortunately, the overwhelming nature of the impediments to these stages of sequential achievement are rarely taken into account. The simple fact of the matter is that so difficult has the process of movementbuilding proven to be since the onset of industrialization in the western world that all democratic protest movements have been aborted or limited in this manner prior to the recruitment of their full natural constituency. The underlying social reality is, therefore, one that is not generally kept firmly in mind as an operative dynamic of modern society — namely, that mass democratic movements are overarchingly difficult for human beings to generate. How does mass protest happen at all, then — to the extent that it does happen?

The Populist revolt — the most elaborate example of mass insurgency we have in American history — provides an abundance of evidence that can be applied in answering this question. The sequential process of democratic movement-building will be seen to involve four stages: (1) the creation of an autonomous institution where new interpretations can materialize that run counter to those of the prevailing authority — a development which for the sake of simplicity, we may describe as “the movement forming”; (2) the creation of a tactical means to attract masses of people — “the movement recruiting”; (3) the achievement of a heretofore culturally unsanctioned level of social analysis — “the movement educating”; and (4) the creation of an institutional means whereby the new ideas, shared now by the rank and file of the mass movement, can be expressed in an autonomous political way — “the movement politicized.”

Imposing cultural roadblocks stand in the way of a democratic movement at every stage of the sequential process, causing losses in the potential constituencies that are to be incorporated into the movement. Many people may not be successfully “recruited,” many who are recruited may not become adequately “educated,” and many who are educated may fail the final test of moving into autonomous political action. The forces of orthodoxy, occupying the most culturally sanctioned command posts in the society, can be counted upon, out of self-interest, to oppose each stage of the sequential process — particularly the latter stages, when the threat posed by the movement has become clear to all. In the aggregate, the struggle to create a mass democratic movement involves intense cultural conflict with many built-in advantages accruing to the partisans of the established order.

Offered here in broad outline, then, is a conceptual framework through which to view the building process of mass democratic movements in modern industrial societies. The recruiting, educating, and politicizing methods will naturally vary from movement to movement and from nation to nation, and the relative success in each stage will obviously vary also. (*) The actions of both the insurgents and the defenders of the received culture can also be counted upon to influence events dramatically.

Within this broad framework, it seems helpful to specify certain subsidiary components. Democratic movements are initiated by people who have individually managed to attain a high level of personal political self-respect. They are not resigned; they are not intimidated. To put it another way, they are not culturally organized to conform to established hierarchical forms. Their sense of autonomy permits them to dare to try to change things by seeking to influence others. The subsequent stages of recruitment and of internal economic and political education (steps two, three, and four) turn on the ability of the democratic organizers to develop widespread methods of internal communication with the mass movement. Such democratic facilities provide the only way the movement can defend itself to its own adherents in the face of the adverse interpretations certain to emanate from the received culture. If the movement is able to achieve this level of internal communication and democracy, and

the ranks accordingly grow in numbers and in political consciousness, a new plateau of social possibility comes within reach of all participants. In intellectual terms, the generating force of the new mass mode of behavior may be rather simply described as “a new way of looking at things.” It constitutes a new and heretofore unsanctioned mass folkway of autonomy. In psychological terms, its appearance reflects the development within the movement of a new kind of collective self-confidence. “Individual self-respect” and “collective self-confidence” constitute, then, the cultural building blocks of mass democratic politics. Their development permits people to conceive of the idea of acting in self-generated democratic ways — as distinct from passively participating in various hierarchical modes bequeathed by the received culture. In this study of Populism, I have given a name to this new plateau of cooperative and democratic conduct. I have called it “the movement culture.” Once attained, it opens up new vistas of social possibility, vistas that are less clouded by inherited assumptions. I suggest that all significant mass democratic movements in human history have generated this autonomous capacity. Indeed, had they not done so, one cannot visualize how they could have developed into significant mass democratic movements. (*)

Democratic politics hinge fundamentally on these sequential relationships. Yet, quite obviously the process is extremely difficult for human beings to set in motion and even more difficult to maintain — a fact that helps explain why genuinely democratic cultures have not yet been developed by mankind. Self-evidently, mass democratic societies cannot be created until the components of the creating process have been theoretically delineated and have subsequently come to be understood in practical ways by masses of people. This level of political analysis has not yet been reached, despite the theoretical labors of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and their sundry disciples and critics. As a necessary consequence, twentieth-century people, instead of participating in democratic cultures, live in hierarchical cultures, “capitalist” and “socialist,” that merely call themselves democratic.

All of the foregoing constitutes an attempt to clear enough cultural and ideological landscape to permit an unhampered view of American Populism. The development of the democratic movement was sequential. The organizational base of the agrarian revolt was an institution called the National Farmers Alliance and Industrial Union. Created by men of discernible self-possession and political self-respect, the Alliance experimented in new methods of economic self-help. After nine years of trial and error, the people of the Alliance developed a powerful mechanism of mass recruitment — the world’s first large-scale working class cooperative. Farmers by the hundreds of thousands flocked into the Alliance. In its recruiting phase, the movement swept through whole states “like a cyclone” because, easily enough, the farmers joined the Alliance in order to join the Alliance cooperative. The subsequent experiences of millions of farmers within their cooperatives proceeded to “educate” them about the prevailing forms of economic power and privilege in America. This process of education was further elaborated through a far-flung agency of internal communication, the 40,000 lecturers of the Alliance lecturing system. Finally, after the effort of the Alliance at economic self-help had been defeated by the financial and political institutions of industrial America, the people of the movement turned to independent political action by creating their own institution, the People’s Party. All of these experiences, stretching over a fifteen-year period from 1877 to 1892, may be seen as an evolutionary pattern of democratic organizing activity that generated, and in turn was generated by, an increasing self-awareness on the part of the participants. In consequence, a mass democratic movement was fashioned. (*)

Once established in 1892, the People’s Party challenged the corporate state and the creed of progress put forward. It challenged, in sum, the world we live in today. Though our loyalty to our own world makes the agrarian revolt culturally difficult to grasp, Populism may nevertheless be seen as a time of economically coherent democratic striving. Having said this, it is also necessary to add that Populists were not supernatural beings. As theoreticians concerned with certain forms of capitalist exploitation

they were creative and, in a number of ways, prescient. As economists, they were considerably more thoughtful and practical than their contemporary political rivals in both major parties. As organizers of a huge democratic movement, Populists learned a great deal about both the power of the received hierarchy and the demands imposed on themselves by independent political action. As third party tacticians, they had their moments, though most of their successes came earlier in the political phase of their movement than later. And, finally, as participants in the democratic creed, they were, on the evidence, far more advanced than most Americans, then or since.

But American Populists did not parachute in from Mars. They grew up in American culture and felt the pull of its teachings. Though they knew they were pioneers, and earnestly endeavored to persuade others of the merit of what they had learned along their own path of democratic innovation, they did not always do so free of inherited cultural barnacles. They had earlier learned a number of things taught by the dominant culture; and more than a few people stumbled into the movement with many of their traditional inheritances almost wholly intact. The tension between these modes of conduct persisted within the agrarian movement throughout its life. Populists also encountered more specific hazards. They sought to enlist the urban working class without understanding the needs, nor the barriers to autonomous political expression, that informed life in the metropolitan ghettos of the nineteenth-century factory worker. Populists sought to enlist landless black sharecroppers (and in so doing explored new modes of interracial political coalition) without ultimately shaking off the most subtle forms of white supremacy that fundamentally undermine the civility of American society in our own time. And Populists tried through democratic politics to bring the corporate state under popular control without fully anticipating the counter-tactics available to the nation's financial and industrial spokesmen. In summary, though Populists generated a vibrant democratic movement, they were not unflinchingly guided by genius. Their shortcomings as well as their achievements contain much that is useful to all those who study history because they continue to nurse aspirations for an industrial society in which generous social relations among masses of people might prevail as a cultural norm.

A final prefatory comment. It is helpful to bear in mind that the Populist moment in America came before the global twentieth-century struggle between the East and the West. It came, therefore, at a time when the range of culturally sanctioned political traditions was broader than two. As children of the two spreading cultures of intellectual conformity that are a product of that conflict, modern people live in a time of extreme politicization of knowledge throughout the world. Rigid modes of thought and terminology dominate the schools and colleges of both traditions. The young of both can imbibe the particular received wisdom of their theoretical tradition (however distorted by the events of history that theoretical tradition has become) or, if they are somehow unconvinced and can cope with the ostracism involved, they can adopt the rival mode. Within the perceived limits of the most ideologically confined of recent centuries, one is surely right: man is either a competitive being or a cooperative being. However all those who are not persuaded by this speculation — or faith — soon discover how difficult it is to express their disbelief in terminology that the confined participants in twentieth-century culture can understand. Capitalist “modernization theory” and Marxist “democratic centralism,” together with supporting linguistic accoutrements, have left mankind in our time with few conceptual options through which to assert believable political aspirations to the masses of the world's peoples. In both traditions, one “believes” or one does not, but in terms of sanctioned categories of political language, the option for the unconvinced is an option of one. So be it. The Populists did not know that the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, and the ascendancy of the multi-national corporation were to be the coercive and competitive products of the industrial age. Spared the ideological apologetics and narrowness of a later time, Populists thought of man as being both competitive and cooperative. They tilted strongly toward the latter, but they also confronted the enduring qualities of the former. They accepted this complexity about mankind, and they tried

conceive of a society that would be generous — and would also house this complexity. With all of their shortcomings, including theoretical shortcomings, the Populists speak to the anxieties of the twentieth century with their own unique brand of rustic relevance.

Out of their cooperative struggle came a new democratic community. It engendered within millions of people what Martin Luther King would later call a “sense of somebodiness.” This “sense” was a new way of thinking about oneself and about democracy. Thus armed, the Populists attempted to insulate themselves against being intimidated by the enormous political, economic, and social pressures that accompanied the emergence of corporate America.

To describe that attempt is to describe their movement.

L. G.

Durham, N.C. May 1, 1978

~~*Of course protest is not invariably an economic expression; it can also emerge from unsanctioned conceptions of civil liberty, as illustrated by the movements of Anti-Federalist suffragettes, feminists, and blacks. While demonstrably important in their own terms, such movements historically have not mounted broad challenges to the underlying economic structures of inherited power and privilege that fundamentally shape the parameters of American society. Even the one movement that most nearly approached this level of insurgency — abolitionism — actually challenged, in slavery, only a deviance *within* the economic order rather than the underlying structure of the order itself.~~

*Though European and Asian conceptions of agricultural “classes” can be applied to America only if one is willing to accept a considerable distortion of reality, Populism can with a stretch of the imagination be seen as a product of the organizing efforts of middle peasants engaged in recruiting both their own “kind” and lower peasants. But one must immediately add, that such interesting examples of agrarian “unity” can be more swiftly explained through recourse either to the labor theory of value or to simple historical observation rather than to class categories.

‡For example, five sequentially related stages of this ideological process, all contradictory conclusions implicit in perfunctory class analysis, are treated on pp. 75-76, 78-80, 84-87, 91-93, and 108-13.

*American factory workers, for example, were unable for generations to successfully complete step one of the process because their initial strikes for recognition were lost and the fragile new unions destroyed. They thus were unable to create autonomous institutions of their own. See pp. 41-42, 117-18, and 174-76.

*The political terminology offered in this study is meant to be inclusive rather than exclusive. The terms “movement forming,” “movement recruiting,” “movement educating,” and “movement politicized,” plus the sub-categories of “individual self-respect,” “collective self-confidence,” and “internal communications,” together with the summary phrase, “movement culture,” all embrace a certain measure of abstraction. More precise terminology would be helpful and clearly needs to be developed. On the other hand, the spacious Marxist abstraction “class consciousness,” is simply too grand to have precise meaning. Though the term was pathbreaking when first developed, it is too unwieldy to describe human actions with the kind of specificity needed to make sense of the hierarchical hazards and democratic opportunities existing within complex twentieth-century social systems.

* Since Populism was a mass movement (and one that attempted to be even more “massive” than it was), the sequential stages in the recruiting and politicizing of its mass constituency are at the core of this study. The stages of this sequential development may be found on pp. 26-35, 38, 41, 49, 58-59, 64-66, 73, 75-87, 91-93, 108-15, 125-36, 148-64, and 172-82. The mass movement reached its practical range of politicization in 1892 (pp. 175-82). The summary interpretation

these sequential democratic stages is on pp. 293-310 and 318-19.

Acknowledgments

To the various acknowledgments specifically pertaining to Populist research that I noted in the unabridged edition of this book, I wish to take this opportunity to add two of a less specific nature. Both relate to those sundry and elusive intellectual influences that shape one's personal perspective. I doubt that one can overstate the impact that *Origins of the New South* by C. Vann Woodward had on those students of American history who reached maturity in the 1950's. Surrounded as we were by historical tomes of limp apology for the Bourbon past, *Origins* opened up new ways of thinking about both the Southern and the national heritage. All historians whose work touches on post-Reconstruction America have ever since stood on Woodward's shoulders. This work is no exception. The most creative democratic theorist that I have been privileged to know on a long and intimate basis is my good friend Harry Boyte. Alert to the ways people can fashion a politics supportive of mass democratic aspirations, he has been alert also to the ways the agrarian crusade encouraged impoverished people to "see themselves" experimenting in democratic forms. The sentence to that effect that forms part of the frontispiece of this study grew out of conversations between us over the manuscript and reflects our mutual respect for another historian, E. P. Thompson. In less specific but even more helpful ways, Harry Boyte has deepened my understanding of the democratic impulse as an embattled but central component of the human experience.

L. G.

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~~I hope we shall crush in its birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations which da
already to challenge our government to a trial of strength, and bid defiance to the laws of o
country.~~

THOMAS JEFFERSON,1816

The people need to “see themselves” experimenting in democratic forms.

I Creating a Democratic Politics

He was the largest landholder... in one county and Justice of the Peace in the next and election commissioner in both, and hence the fountainhead if not of law at least of advice and suggestion.... He was a farmer, a usurer, a veterinarian; Judge Benbow of Jefferson once said of him that a milder-mannered man never bled a mule or stuffed a ballot box. He owned most of the good land in the county and held mortgages on most of the rest. He owned the store and the cotton gin and the combined grist mill and blacksmith shop in the village proper and it was considered, to put it mildly, bad luck for a man of the neighborhood to do his trading or gin his cotton or grind his meal or shoe his stock anywhere else.

The furnishing merchant in *The Hamlet*, by William Faulkner

The suballiance is a schoolroom. Alliance lecturer

Prelude to Populism

Discovering the Limits of American Politics

“The people are near-sighted....”

People understood that the war — the Civil War — had changed everything in America. For four bloody years, the war itself had dominated the life of the nation, and when peace came, the memory of the war shaped the way people acted. Almost a generation after the guns had fallen silent, the nation's new poet of democracy, Walt Whitman, was saying that the essence of history, philosophy, art, poetry, and even personal character “for all future America” would trace its sources back to the war.

The flamboyant poet left one thing out. The war also revolutionized the way Americans thought about politics. After Appomattox, the nation's party system had become so fundamentally altered that the change indeed seemed to be “for all future time.” The war, not political ideas, dominated the new American party system.

To a number of thoughtful Americans, the crucial postwar topic for the nation — as important in the long run as the future status of the freedman — concerned the need to reorganize the country's exploitive banking system to bring a measure of economic fairness to the “plain people,” white as well as black. However this idea — like almost any economic idea in post-Civil War America — confronted national political constituencies seemingly impervious to new concepts of any kind. The state of affairs was traceable to a party system which had been so massively altered by the war that the new situation seemed to make Whitman's sweeping description appear to be an under-statement.

The old Jacksonian resonances of Whig-Democratic conflict, containing as they did still old rhythms of the Jeffersonian-Federalist struggle, were all but obliterated by the massive realignment of party constituencies that had accompanied the war and its aftermath. The memories and even some of the slogans of ancestral debates still persisted in the postwar American ethos, but they no longer possessed a secure political home. Sectional, religious, and racial loyalties and prejudices were used to organize the nation's two major parties into vast coalitions that ignored the economic interests of millions.

The post-Civil War nation contained three basic occupational groups. Ranked in order of number they were farmers, urban workers, and the commercial classes. The war had divided the three groups into six constituencies — Northern farmers, workers, and men of commerce, and their counterparts in the South. Two additional groups were defined less by occupation than by caste — free Negroes in the North and ex-slaves in the South— making a total of eight broad classifications. It was a striking feature of post-Civil War politics that a substantial majority of persons within seven of these eight constituencies followed their wartime sympathies, “voting as they shot,” into the 1890's.

The sole exception was the urban working class of the North, which fought for the Union but voted heavy majorities for the rebel-tainted Democratic Party. For the voters in this class, sectional loyalties had given way before religious and racial loyalties as the prime determinants of political affiliation. Uneasily adrift in a sea of Yankee Protestant Republicanism, the largely immigrant and overwhelmingly Catholic urban workers clustered defensively in makeshift political lifeboats fashioned after the Tammany model. Generally run by Irish bosses, these scattered municipal vessels essentially conveyed patronage and protection. Though nominally Democratic, little in their design reflected Jeffersonian patterns; their chief function, aside from affording their captains a measure

income and status, was to provide the immigrant masses with local security in an alien world. The Catholic Democratic tendency, defensive though it was, encouraged a reaction among Protestants that they themselves considered defensive. By inescapable, if circular logic, it provided many thousands of Protestants one more reason to vote Republican — to protect themselves against “immigrant hordes” who voted Democratic. A quarter of a century after the Civil War, the organization of party constituencies along lines of sectional, racial, and religious loyalty had been confirmed by the remarkable stability and relative balance of the multi-state network of local political institutions each major party came to possess.

2

A review of the allegiances of these Republican and Democratic constituencies reveals the extent and depth of their war-related commitments. By 1868 the white farmers of the North who had filled the ranks of the Grand Army of the Republic found a settled home in the army’s political auxiliary, the Grand Old Party. The decision had been made simpler by the convenient fact that both party and army possessed the same commander in chief, Ulysses S. Grant. Throughout the North the politics of army pensions, orchestrated by loyal Republican leagues, contributed additional political adhesive. From New England to Minnesota, hundreds of small towns, as well as broad swaths of rural America became virtual rotten boroughs of Republicanism. The original prewar coalition of free soilers, abolitionists, and Whigs which had carried Lincoln to the White House thus found in postwar sectionalism a common ground that proved far more serviceable than the controversial issue of Negro rights.

Northern blacks voted Republican for war-related reasons also, though they preferred to see the G.O.P. as an egalitarian idea — the party of emancipation — rather than as the political manifestation of a sectional army. But the passing of radical abolitionism proved rapid. The bankers, manufacturers, shippers, and merchants who had provided much of the direction for the G.O.P. from its inception soon wearied of their attempt to build a postwar party in the South based on black suffrage. A series of election victories in the 1860’s and 1870’s proved that the G.O.P. could rule with a basically Northern constituency, Negroes, their morale declining and white radical abolitionists, their numbers thinning. The party lost the intra-party debate over Southern policy. For most white Republicans, the choice was not hard. Party professionals, more enamored of election results than theories, found the politics of sectionalism — “waving the bloody shirt,” in the contemporary expression — to be far more persuasive to voters than the elaborate defenses of black rights that were necessary to justify Reconstruction policy in the South. As early as 1868 the Freedman’s Bureau was, in effect, allowed to lapse, and the G.O.P. thereafter gradually abandoned both the cause of the freedman and the commitment to a “reconstructed” South that it implied. Given the known prejudice toward blacks of a large portion of the party’s white adherents in the North, the superiority of the bloody shirt as a campaign appeal was unassailable. As Negro spokesmen grimly noted, blacks were steadily losing their political influence — though their votes were still counted by the reoriented Republican Party.

The orientation, it soon became apparent, belonged to business. Indeed, the decline in abolitionist zeal was more than balanced by the triumphant spirit of business enterprise that suffused the remodeled Northern G.O.P. Though all participants in the world of commerce did not habitually march in perfect political lockstep, particularly on monetary policy, a workable hegemony within commercial ranks was fashioned in the 1870’s and 1880’s as a precursor to its near total ascendancy in the 1890s. Thus the many-faceted Republican coalition that had come to power in 1861 became in the postwar years a much narrower business party, closely tied to the politics of sectional division. Only faint echoes of

the multi-sectional impulses of prewar business Whiggery remained. If Northern blacks faced a dilemma as the party of emancipation became an engine of enterprising enterprise, Southern white farmers encountered a similar problem of identification in the restructuring politics of the shattered Southland. Like blacks, Southern whites had an emotional basis for party loyalty — though, of course, it was to the party of the Confederacy rather than to the party of the Union. But when federal troops marched away at the end of Reconstruction and conservative white rule returned, the reconstituted Democratic Party ceased to be recognizable as an institution of “the plain people.” Though Southern farmers from Virginia to Texas looked upon their political home as “the party of the fathers,” the postwar Democracy no longer responded to such agrarian rhythms that had existed in the times of Jefferson and Jackson. Rather, the Southern Democratic Party responded to the needs of “New South” entrepreneurs — even as the farmers who had fought in the Confederate Army continued to provide their dazed allegiance. Conceived in white supremacy and clothed with the symbolic garments of the Lost Cause, the postwar institution of business was able to attract the allegiance of white Southerners of all classes, including the small number of urban workers in the region. Indeed, in the maturing system of nostalgic “Solid South” Democratic politics, tributes to the fallen and the gallant of the Lost Cause became such ritualistic features of public speaking that almost all orations, including those at funerals, were inherently political in form — though they remained essentially nonideological in content.

These developments, of course, left Southern blacks as isolated as their counterparts in the North were. Immediately after Appomattox the war legacies that shaped the voting habits of the ex-slaves had the distinction of merging emotional loyalties with visible self-interest. The black Republican Party of the South might have been a product of the war, but it was also a logical expression of the political presence and needs of Negro people. However, by the late 1880’s, with the steady deterioration of Northern Republican commitment to the civil and economic rights of freedmen, the clear political purpose underlying black allegiance to the party of Lincoln made no more sense in terms of self-interest than did the other residual war loyalties operating in the land.

3

Everywhere — North and South, among Republicans and Democrats — business and financial entrepreneurs had achieved effective control of a restructured American party system. To innovative monetary theorists, the fact was central: sectional prejudices in the 1880’s and 1890’s persisted as an enormous political barrier to anyone bent on creating a multi-sectional party of reform. Indeed, the mature relationship between sectionalism, issueless politics, and the business direction of both major parties not only became the animating political cause of the emergence of Populism, but the almost wholly nonideological climate created by sectional politics was also to prove the third party’s principal obstacle.

By the time Benjamin Harrison moved into the White House in 1888, the postwar restructuring of the American party system had seemingly become quite settled. Though each party remained dominant in its own section and possessed lesser or greater pockets of strength in the other’s bailiwick — largely for reasons of sectional, racial, or religious loyalty — both responded primarily to the needs of businessmen. Of course, neither always found it convenient to stress the matter with relentless precision.

Not political ideas but war-related emotions that had intrinsic political meaning became the central element of post-Reconstruction politics in America. While practical politicians might employ ritualistic references to the high or low tariff to dress up their party’s principles, they also maintained

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