

of an encyclopedia could hope to cover it all. The second objection is that the book relies heavily upon secondary material and makes no claim to be based on empirical research. Our answer must be that, at present, the general usefulness of much of the specialist material available is impaired for want of the kind of conceptual clarification which this study aims to provide. Finally, it may be objected that the classification of types of populism offered here is arbitrary, since it would be possible in principle to invent an infinite number of alternative classifications. This is, of course, true. We must simply hope that the scheme suggested here will prove useful, if only in stimulating someone else to provide a better one.

1. *Populism in the United States*

What you farmers need to do is to raise less corn and more hell.—*Attributed to Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Lease*¹

THE SETTING

In the last decade of the nineteenth century a radical populist movement appeared with startling suddenness in the United States, lasted long enough to give the American political establishment a severe shock, and then faded away as quickly as it had come. The People's Party held its first national nominating convention at Omaha in July 1892. There they adopted a radical platform which contained demands ranging from government ownership of railroads to popular referendums and from monetary inflation to the banning of strikebreakers. The Populist candidate in the 1892 Presidential election, James Weaver, polled over one million votes. In the next Presidential election, however, the established parties fought back. The Democrats divided the People's Party by adopting some of their measures and nominating a semipopulist candidate, William Jennings Bryan, while the Republicans put on a massively financed campaign which defeated Bryan and, with him, hopes of a Populist victory. Support

for the movement, which quickly flickered out, had been sectional, coming from Southern and Western states and overwhelmingly from farmers.

The modern reader's first reaction to American Populism is likely to be surprise that farmers should have been capable of so much political radicalism. Peasant unrest does not surprise us in this way: that villagers in Russia or Rumania or Mexico should have revolted against centuries of oppression may seem quite comprehensible. But commercial farmers in a democratic society taking to radical politics, allying themselves with strikers and tramps, and demanding "socialistic" extensions of governmental control, may seem positively bizarre. So much so, indeed, that (as we shall see later) some interpreters of American Populism have sought to explain it as an irrational phenomenon produced by a variety of dark bucolic urges. A closer look at the origins of the Populist movement, however, will make the farmers' actions seem considerably less baffling.

Nineteenth-century Americans were citizens of a self-consciously democratic state and heirs of a culture that stressed independence, self-help, and the ability of a man (or at any rate a white man) to get on in the world by enterprise and effort. In the years after the Civil War, however, farmers in the West and South increasingly found that experience contradicted these expectations. Members of the sovereign people they might be, but they nevertheless felt impotent before powers that seemed to them to have no right to control their lives.

Some of the most imposing of these powers, particularly in the West, were the railroad corporations. As

defenders of the railroads pointed out, farmers had reason to be grateful to them, for it was railroad building (aided by the grant of vast tracts of government land to the railroad companies) that had made possible the rapid opening up of the American West. The railroads had encouraged settlement by providing easy access to new areas and by running advertising campaigns that recruited settlers from far and wide.² Many of the farmers, however, took a more ambivalent view of this corporate fairy godmother. The settlers were utterly dependent on the railroad to bring them equipment and supplies and to take their grain to market, so that the companies, having captive customers, naturally charged monopoly rates. Western freight charges were sometimes four times as high as the rate for the same distance in the East.³ Furthermore, many railroads in the wheat country refused to quote rates for carrying grain to cities close to the farmer, insisting, for instance, that the seller who wished to send his crop to Minneapolis must pay the full "transit" rate through to Chicago or Milwaukee. Railroads, in alliance with elevator companies, refused to supply freight cars for small quantities of grain, or made the small farmer wait while the market was flooded and the price dropped. "Equality before the law," wrote one critic, "is a canon of political liberty; equality before the railways should become the canon of industrial liberty."⁴

The farmers' impotent fury at the power of the railroad corporations was increased by the latter's domination of Western state politics. Railroad managers took care to keep control of state legislatures and to ensure by bribery and corruption that their interests would be safeguarded.

One of the commonest means was the liberal issue of free travel passes to public officials, editors of newspapers, and other persons of influence, but there were even more blatant examples of corruption, like the "oil rooms" set up in Lincoln, Nebraska, when the state legislature was in session: "Run by lawyers and other lobbyists for railroads, these rooms were for the purpose of 'oiling' legislators to vote correctly on pending legislation in which railroads were interested."⁵ In the circumstances, bitterness against the railroad companies was not surprising, and neither was the Populist conviction, which gained strength as the companies combined into ever more gigantic corporations, that the only adequate solution lay in government control.

If the farmer's powerlessness before the local railroad company became apparent every harvest time, his subjection to creditors was a perpetual nightmare. Settlers on new land in the West needed capital for machinery, fencing, and seed grain, and they mortgaged their land to get it. As production rose, however, farm prices dropped, and the farmer found himself in a cleft stick. If the weather was favorable and the crop abundant, the market was glutted and prices were low; whereas in the years of drought on the frontier after 1887, the farmers saw their corn shriveled by burning winds or smothered by dust storms. Either way, however hard he worked, the farmer could not keep himself from falling more and more uncontrollably into debt. To make matters worse, many had borrowed recklessly to get in on the boom in Western lands that followed from railway building. Thousands loaded themselves with debt, assuming that land prices

would continue to rise around mushrooming settlements like Beatrice, Nebraska, where a real estate firm's slogan read:

Beatrice is not dead or dying,
Real estate is simply flying,
He who buys today is wise,
For Beatrice dirt is on the rise.⁶

The inevitable crash, started by the droughts which sent settlers in their covered wagons streaming back toward the East, brought land prices tumbling down and left farmers with nothing but their mortgages.

To find the worst examples of the powerlessness of the debtor before his creditor, however, one must look at the Southern states and at farmers caught in the grip of the "crop lien" system.⁷ The upheaval of the Civil War had left behind a mass of small farmers, both white and black, who were nominal landowners or share-cropping tenants, but often in a state of desperate poverty. The only source of credit available to them was the local storekeeper or "furnishing merchant," who would let them have implements, fertilizers, and provisions on credit—but only at the cost of mortgaging their crop in advance. This meant that the farmer could buy only from the merchant who held this lien on his crop, at whatever prices the merchant chose to ask. He could buy only what the merchant would let him have, and if at harvest time, as often happened, the price his crop brought in was not enough to clear the merchant's account, his only way of providing for himself and his family was to mortgage the next year's crop before it was even planted. The farmer was in no position to

complain of the merchant's high prices or to contest the merchant's accounts; nor could he even choose what crop to grow, for the merchant insisted that it should be cotton, which was always salable, and not corn or potatoes which the farmer might eat himself. As a result, the many small farmers who had been tempted into cotton-growing by high prices after the Civil War were unable to switch to more suitable crops as the price of cotton sank lower and lower.⁸ A recent historian describes the constant humiliation the system inflicted upon the farmer every time he went shopping: "The farmer, his eyes downcast and his hat . . . in his hand, approached the merchant with a list of his needs. The man behind the counter consulted a ledger, and after a mumbled exchange, moved to his shelves to select the goods that would satisfy at least a part of his customer's wants. Rarely did the farmer receive the range of items or even the quantity of one item he had requested."⁹

Indebtedness and the experience of subjection to the creditor which it entailed were the regular experience of Southern and Western farmers in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Indebtedness is also a common experience among the masses in modern industrial societies who buy their homes through mortgages and most of their household goods by hire-purchase. But the modern executive who takes on such financial commitments is aided by inflation and rising money incomes: in real terms, his debts decline in value with every passing year, whether he pays them off or not. The opposite was the case with the debt-ridden farmers who formed the backbone of the Populist movement. Return to the gold standard after the

Civil War had caused a contraction in the money supply which forced prices down and increased the value of the dollar. Consequently, while the farmer's debt was worth more to his creditors, paying the interest on it required more and more bushels of wheat or bales of cotton.

Between the Civil War and the heyday of Populism in the 1890s, the money question periodically emerged as a political issue. There were, roughly speaking, three distinct views of the subject, those of the Greenbackers, Goldbugs, and Silverites, although all kinds of combinations and qualifications were possible. Greenbackers, called after the inflationary paper money of the war years, maintained that since gold and silver have no intrinsic value, currency derives its value simply from official recognition and need not be tied to any metallic standard. They demanded a paper currency in sufficient supply to cater for population growth and commercial expansion. The Populist Ignatius Donnelly later devised a vivid metaphor to describe the effects of lack of money in an expanding economy: "Take a child a few years old; let a blacksmith weld around his waist an iron band. At first it causes him little inconvenience. He plays. As he grows older it becomes tighter; it causes him pain; he scarcely knows what ails him. He still grows. All his internal organs are cramped and displaced. He grows still larger; he has the head, shoulders and limbs of a man and the waist of a child. He is a monstrosity. He dies."¹⁰

Most of those who debated the currency issue, however, were "hard money" men, distrustful of paper not secured by precious metal. The question was, however, what precious metal should form the basis of the country's

money? Should it be gold alone, or silver equally with gold? From 1792 until 1873 the United States had been officially bimetallic, with gold and silver dollars having equal standing as legal tender. It happened, however, that by the mid-century silver had become scarce and was fetching more in the bullion markets than its official worth in coin, with the result that the silver dollar had virtually gone out of circulation. Since most of the world's major trading nations were in the process of adopting the gold standard, this situation suited American financial leaders very well, and the demonetizing of silver was confirmed by a currency measure that passed Congress in 1873.

At the time, since silver dollars were not in any case in common use, this esoteric measure passed virtually unnoticed. Before long, however, it was to become infamous in silverite demonology as "the Crime of '73," supposedly perpetrated upon the American people by a cabal of English, Jewish, and Wall Street bankers. For no sooner had the measure gone through than a boom in Western silver mining increased the supply and reduced the price of silver. It would have been feasible once again to coin silver at the old ratio with gold, and to do so would have expanded the currency and helped the nation's debtors as well as benefited the inhabitants of the Western mining territories. This was blocked, however, by financial experts who had their eyes on international trade and who feared that if the United States were to adopt a bimetallic currency once more, cheap silver would drive out gold, leaving the country unable to meet her obligations to gold standard nations such as Britain.¹¹

After considerable controversy in the 1870s over the position of silver, a compromise was reached which did not satisfy any of the parties but did something to defuse the silver issue for the time being. The Bland-Allison Act, passed in 1878 over a Presidential veto, made silver legal tender once more and authorized the coinage of a certain number of silver dollars. The amount to be coined was too low, however, to create the inflation hoped for by debtors and dreaded by creditors. Meanwhile the silver grievance rumbled on, to contribute a plank to the Populist platform and eventually, in 1896, to swamp the rest of it.

From the 1870s on, the themes that were to come together in Populism were finding various means of expression. Farmers were first organized by the Grange, founded primarily as a social and educational organization, but which nevertheless articulated some of the farmers' grievances, particularly against the railroads. Under Granger pressure, legislatures in some of the Western states made attempts to regulate the activities of the railroads, though without a great deal of success.¹² To find the true seedbed of Populism, however, we must turn to the Alliance movement.

THE RISE OF THE FARMERS' ALLIANCE

The origins of a grass-roots movement are, in the nature of things, difficult to locate precisely. Nevertheless, historians have traced the beginnings of Populism to Texas, meeting place of the West and South, where in the early 1880s a Farmers' Alliance grew up, mobilized by lecturers

who traveled around speaking to farmers.¹³ The message they carried was that "the farmers of this country have labored, and others have made the laws," with the result that "the non-producer has thrived while the producer has grown poor."¹⁴ The answer, proclaimed the lecturers, lay in combination. In unity was strength: if the farmers joined in cooperatives for buying and selling, they would be able to stand up to their creditors. The cooperative crusade spread like wildfire across the South and West, bringing to desperate farmers the hope expressed by a Georgian who wrote to the Alliance journal: "We are going to get out of debt and be free and independent people once more. Mr. Editor, we Georgia people are in earnest about this thing."¹⁵

The movement which sprang from Texas, and which later acquired the resounding title of the National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union, was not the only farmers' movement on the ground. There was, for instance, the flourishing Agricultural Wheel of Arkansas, with which the Alliance eventually negotiated a merger: and there was an independent Northern organization, also officially entitled the National Farmers' Alliance, which had been organized from Chicago by Milton George, editor of a farm journal there. The Southern Alliance, however, was by far the strongest, and it was within its fraternal organization that farmers first caught a heady glimpse of the power that might come from solidarity.

No doubt some of the exhilaration that sent Alliance membership soaring was generated by sheer community spirit and revivalist-style meetings,¹⁶ but a more potent attraction was the vision of cooperation among producers

to defeat the monopolists who controlled the market. The summit of Alliance efforts was reached in the Jute Bag Boycott of 1889, when the farmers took on a real live trust and won. A group of jute manufacturers had united to drive up the price of the bagging traditionally used for bales of cotton. Instead of paying the higher prices, members of the Alliance all across the South united to boycott jute and arranged to have cotton bagging manufactured instead. In Georgia the farmers' enthusiasm for the cause was symbolized by a double wedding of Alliance supporters at which both pairs of brides and grooms were dressed in cotton bagging.¹⁷

In spite of such moments of success, however, the history of the Alliance's attempts at cooperation is on the whole a melancholy record of enterprises begun with high hopes, sustained with great dedication¹⁸ but doomed to ultimate failure. Often cooperative attempts at marketing crops or supplying fertilizers and machinery failed through the deliberate opposition of local merchants and bankers. The fact remains, nevertheless, that most collapsed because their financial basis was too shaky: their backers were simply too poor. The soundest and most longlasting were those which, like the South Carolina cooperative exchange, refused credit to members¹⁹; but these, clearly, were of no use to the innumerable farmers caught in the toils of the crop-lien system, who practically never saw cash from one year's end to another.

The nemesis which haunted more ambitious attempts to break out of the cycle of debt was illustrated by the disastrous history of the Texas Exchange, the brainchild of Charles Macune, who had emerged as leader of the

Alliance. The Exchange attempted not only to market the farmers' cotton on favorable terms, but also to provide the credit necessary to free debtors from their dependence upon the furnishing merchant. Unfortunately, the capital to do this was simply not available and in 1889, after only two years of operation, the Exchange collapsed. This failure, and others equally disheartening, drove many farmers out of the Alliance, their hopes dashed.

Those who did not give up, however—and this included Macune and most of the early leaders of the Alliance—turned to a new way of thinking. It was becoming clear that the farmers were not strong enough to tackle the problem of credit by themselves, any more than they could take on the railroads and win. But why should they not use their potential power as citizens and get the government to support them against the monopolists in charge of transport and money? Surely, with over a million members in the South and the support, by 1890, of two-fifths of the farmers of Kansas and the Dakotas, the Alliance must be able to exercise influence on a national scale.²⁰

The attempt to make the government do for them what they could not do for themselves forced the farmers into politics and turned their movement into Populism. Going into politics, however, was not a simple matter. Some of the problems it was likely to present had long been obvious. The Texas Alliance had almost split in 1886 over differences between radical and “nonpartisan” groups,²¹ while signs of the future divisiveness of the racial issue were already evident in the Alliance's ambiguous attitude toward black farmers. There was on the one hand some

recognition that black and white farmers shared common economic interests, and a separate Colored Farmers' National Alliance had been organized under the wing of the white Alliance. At the same time, however, it was understood that it was out of the question for the Alliance actually to allow black members. If the Alliance were to involve itself in politics, then, it was going to run up instantly against the taboos and constraints of the South.²²

By 1889, the potentialities and pitfalls of the emerging movement were both clearly visible. The Southern Alliance and its cooperative enterprises had spread all over the South and West, while the separate Northern Alliance was gaining strength farther north. When both of them held conventions simultaneously in St. Louis in December 1889, it was expected that they would unite into a single massive farmers' movement. Nor was the movement to be confined to farmers, for the Alliance men thought of themselves, in comprehensive Jacksonian terminology, as “producers.” Even in the early days in Texas, Alliance men had sided with striking railway workers against the monopolistic railroad kings,²³ and the labor organization with which they had worked, the Knights of Labor, was also represented at St. Louis. Here, surely, was the basis for a grand coalition of farmers and laborers, South and West, the producers of America against the monopolists and financiers of the plutocratic East.

Although the St. Louis meeting presaged the emerging Populist movement, there were ominous signs. The Northern and Southern Alliances did not succeed in uniting, and although the representatives of Kansas and the Dakotas, where cooperative enterprises had gone

furthest, came over to the Southern Alliance, sectional differences were evident. It was clear, however, that unity was going to be crucial, for the logic of the situation was pushing the Alliance men further toward political activity. At the St. Louis convention Charles Macune put forward the most radical scheme yet suggested for coping with the farmers' difficulties. This was the "subtreasury" plan, designed to provide cheap credit for the farmer and to enable him to hold back his crop instead of having to sell it at a rock-bottom price when the market was glutted. Macune proposed that in each of the agrarian states a government warehouse should be established to receive and store cotton, grain, etc., and to give the farmer in return, at a low rate of interest, a negotiable credit note.²⁴ The proposal was adopted by the Alliance and was even introduced into Congress,²⁵ but it was ignored by the country's legislators and ridiculed by journalists. It was becoming increasingly clear, in fact, that if the farmers were to achieve anything they would have to go into politics to an extent that most of them had not so far contemplated.

THE PEOPLE'S PARTY

Going into politics, as the farmers of the Alliance soon learned, meant encountering two lions in the path. It meant, in the first place, running up against the sectional party loyalties of North and South. But even if this obvious hazard could be negotiated, it meant also that the locus and concerns of the farmers' movement would be changed. Control of the movement would pass inevitably from the

farmers themselves to professional politicians, who would be less concerned with clear principles and grievances than with tactical alliances and compromises.²⁶

While the tension between Populism and politics would loom large toward the end of the Populist saga, the immediate problem was the former one, sectional loyalties. Since the Civil War, politics had been drastically simplified along sectional lines, kept clear by exhortations at election time to "vote as you shot, boys!" Broadly speaking, the North (with the notable exception of the immigrant urban workers) was Republican and tended to regard Democrats as traitors, while in the South most whites were Democrats and Republicanism was for scalawags and blacks. In real life, of course, things were never as simple as that: for instance, the massive Democratic majorities of the "Solid South" rested partly upon bribed and coerced black voters, while the white hill farmers there, discontented with their local Bourbon oligarchies, sometimes broke Democratic ranks.²⁷ But although third parties occasionally managed to dent sectional loyalty even in the South, their members were never allowed to forget that Southern politics was a very serious business. Any breach in the hegemony of the white man's party brought back the specter of Reconstruction and blacks in power, with the result that (as Populists were to discover) a white opponent of the Democrats was liable to be regarded as an outcast and a criminal.

Since this was the background against which the Alliance farmers of the South and West were attempting to forge a new political movement, it is not surprising that they soon found themselves in trouble. Nevertheless, the

élan of the farmers' eruption into politics in 1890 led many to believe that the impossible could be accomplished. Such were the political earthquakes in Kansas and parts of the South that only in retrospect did the warning signs become evident.

The most startling political advent of Populism was the campaign in Kansas in 1890. In spite of occasional bursts of third-party activity by Greenbackers and others, the state had long been controlled by a Republican Party which was more responsive to railroads than to farmers, and which kept the latter in line by recourse to the Civil War rhetoric of the "bloody shirt." By 1890, however, many Kansas farmers were in a mood to rebel against their traditional allegiance. In 1887, as drought scorched the crops, the speculative boom in Western land had collapsed. Between 1888 and 1892 half of the population of western Kansas, most of them only recently arrived, fled back to the East, while those who remained were left with poor crops, low farm prices, and terrifying mortgages.²⁸ In the fall of 1889 corn prices were so low that farmers were burning corn in their stoves. As a farm boy recalled: "Many a time have I warmed myself by the kitchen stove in which ears were burning briskly, popping and crackling in the jolliest fashion. And if, as we sat around such a fire watching the year's crop go up the chimney, the talk sometimes became bitter . . . who will wonder?"²⁹

After futile efforts to gain recognition and redress for their grievances through the Republican Party, the Alliance farmers at last revolted. In March 1890 a meeting of County Alliance presidents resolved that in the coming elections "we will no longer divide on party lines and

will only cast our votes for candidates of the people, by the people and for the people."³⁰ By midsummer, the logic of their activities had carried the farmers into the formation of a new party, the People's Party.³¹

The campaign in Kansas that summer generated enormous enthusiasm. Popular orators emerged from the grass roots, including "Sockless Jerry" Simpson, whose soubriquet followed an exchange in which he had jeered at a political opponent for his silk stockings and excessively gentlemanly appearance, and had been accused in return of wearing no socks at all. Many of the speakers were women, like Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Lease, mother of four and a fiery speaker: "Wall Street owns the country. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street and for Wall Street. The great common people of this country are slaves, and monopoly is the master."³²

But there was no shortage of Populist preachers. According to one historian: "The farmers, the country merchants, the cattle-herders, they of the long chin-whiskers, and they of the broad-brimmed hats and heavy boots, had . . . heard the word and could preach the gospel of Populism. . . . Women with skins tanned to parchment by the hot winds, with bony hands of toil and clad in faded calico, could talk in meeting, and could talk straight to the point."³³

The orators spoke to crowds of farmers who had jolted for miles over rough tracks to join the processions of carts with their banners, their brass bands, their floats with girls knitting socks for "Sockless Jerry," and their Populist songs. The upshot of the campaign was a severe shock

for the Kansas Republican Party, as Alliance candidates captured the state legislature and five of the seven Congressional seats, and a Populist senator, William Peffer, was sent to Washington. The campaign was sustained by the exhilaration of a genuinely grass-roots movement. The "people" had emerged into politics, and one of the constant themes of their meetings was hostility to professional politicians and their maneuverings.³⁴ The heady vision of a national popular uprising against the elite was perfectly expressed by one of the speakers at a July Fourth gathering that summer: "I will tell you what you are going to see. . . . You will see arrayed on one side the great magnates of the country, and Wall Street brokers, and the plutocratic power; and on the other you will see the people."³⁵ The extent of this revolt against traditional politics was appropriately symbolized by the fact that the speaker who so succinctly presented the Populist outlook, Leonidas Polk, national president of the Farmers' Alliance, was a North Carolinian and former Confederate soldier, a Southerner preaching Populism in the heart of Republican territory.

While the Kansas farmers had been trying their strength against the Republican politicians, Southern Alliance men had not been idle. But as those who dreamed of a national farmers' uprising were soon to be reminded, politics was different in the South. Even in Kansas, many a farmer must have wrestled with his old party loyalties before deciding to vote for the People's Party: but the ties holding voters to Republicanism in the North were as nothing compared with the strength of Democracy in the South. Since the end of Reconstruction, most Southern

states were virtually one-party states, so that the natural tactic for the insurgent Alliance men of 1890 was not to confront the taboos by forming a new People's Party, but simply to capture the Democracy from within. As one Alliance man saw the matter, "Being Democrats and in the majority, we took possession of the Democratic Party."³⁶ The organized farmers gained control of Democratic nominating conventions in several states and applied the "Alliance Yardstick" to candidates, supporting only those who backed their cause. The most dramatic results came in Georgia, where the governor, three-quarters of the senators, and four-fifths of the representatives were all pledged to the Alliance.³⁷

When the Alliance held its annual convention at Ocala, Florida, in December 1890, its leaders were faced with the problems of their own success. The farmers had undoubtedly arrived in politics, but in ways that promised endless contradictions. In the South they had scored many successes within the Democratic Party, but just how solid were these successes? Would the Democratic politicians who had promised to uphold Alliance interests remember their promises when in office? And would the prosperous farmers who headed the Alliances in many states try to hold them to radical schemes like the subtreasury plan?³⁸ Even more serious, however, was the question of relations between Northern and Southern Alliance men. The farmers' representatives who had succeeded with their new People's Party in Kansas wished to convert their Southern colleagues to third-party activity: otherwise, they would be open to the charge in their home states of splitting the Republican vote and letting the Democrats in.³⁹ What,

then, was the Alliance to do in the next Presidential election year, 1892? Was it or was it not to back a national People's Party? A split was avoided only by postponing the question to a conference to be held in February 1892, leaving the crucial battles to be fought locally in the intervening period.

Although a People's Party did emerge from the Alliance to fight the Presidential election of 1892, the path that led to its formation was a long and thorny one, and many of the farmers who had previously supported the Alliance fell by the wayside. Failures in the cooperative enterprises were in any case taking their toll of the membership, but the strains of breaking with old party loyalties alienated many more. It did not take long for Southern farmers to realize that most of the Democrats they had elected in 1890 would do nothing for them; but to leave the white man's party and split the Solid South was not a tactic to be undertaken lightly. Nevertheless, a surprising number of Alliance radicals brought themselves to do just that. Texas, the original home of the Alliance, formed a People's Party in 1891,⁴⁰ and (not without hesitation) took the dramatic step of including black members on equal terms.⁴¹ There were soon vigorous People's Parties in Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina as well.

Meanwhile, enthusiastic Northern third-party men had been busy, and the emergence of Populism on a national scale was consummated at the party's first nominating convention, held in Omaha in July 1892, when James Weaver was nominated as the Populist Presidential candidate and the Populist platform was established. Its concrete demands were prefaced by a ringing preamble

written by Ignatius Donnelly, a reformer of long-standing and author of the radical novel, *Caesar's Column*. After describing the miserable condition to which the American people had been reduced by the power of plutocrats, the preamble declared: "We seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of 'the plain people' with whose class it originated."⁴² In view of the need for action to remedy the sufferings of "the producing class," the Populists declared: "We believe that the powers of government—in other words, of the people—should be expanded (as in the case of the postal service) as rapidly and as far as the good sense of an intelligent people and the teachings of experience shall justify, to the end that oppression, injustice and poverty shall eventually cease in the land."

According to the Omaha platform, "wealth belongs to him who creates it. . . . The interests of rural and civic labor are the same; their enemies are identical." The Party called for a "safe, sound, and flexible" currency in increased supply to be advanced to the people at a low rate of interest by means of the subtreasury plan for storage of agricultural produce, and also for free coinage of silver. Their demands included a graduated income tax, government-established postal savings banks, and state ownership of railroads and telegraph and telephone systems. Land monopolized by railways and other corporations, or in the hands of aliens, should be reclaimed by the government for grant to genuine settlers. Appended to this formal platform were resolutions on a variety of other matters, including a demand for an effective secret ballot, restriction of immigrant labor, shorter

working hours in industry, the banning of Pinkerton strikebreakers, direct election of U.S. senators, and the adoption of the initiative and referendum.

The People's Party entered the elections of 1892 with high hopes, but although their Presidential candidate, General Weaver, received over a million votes—a very creditable showing for a new third party—the results were disquieting. In the first place, Weaver had clearly failed to make much impression in the South. His war record with the Union army did not help, and perhaps if Leonidas Polk of North Carolina, head of the Southern Alliance, had lived long enough to head the ticket, instead of dying suddenly in 1892, more Southern Alliance men might have torn themselves away from the Democratic Party.

As it was, however, the People's Party evidently lacked the allegiance of many of the people, while those who did support it found themselves in contradictory positions. In Kansas, for instance, a Populist governor, L. D. Lewelling, and a Populist-dominated senate had been elected, but only at the price of an electoral alliance with the Democrats. This tactic of "fusion" generated much heat among Kansas Populists, many of whom had seen their movement partly as a protest against shady political deals,⁴³ and it was very hard to reconcile with what was happening in the South. For those radical and brave enough to come out for Populism below the Mason-Dixon line were engaged in warfare with the Democratic Party that far surpassed ordinary politics in bitterness. Southern Populists like Tom Watson of Georgia represented a threat to the established Democratic oligarchy: worse still,

they threatened the bastion of white supremacy. When Populists argued that the interests of poor white and poor black farmers were the same, and when, more dramatically, Watson and his supporters saved a black Populist from a lynch mob,⁴⁴ they earned the implacable hostility of those who were determined to keep the blacks down at all costs. Although many small farmers in the South did support the Populist cause, their strength was never reflected in election results. The local bosses stopped at nothing: they bribed or intimidated voters, flooded the polls with illegal supporters brought in from the next county (so that in Tom Watson's own district the total recorded vote was double the number of qualified voters),⁴⁵ or, since the local officials were all Democrats, simply falsified the returns. As a result, the areas where Populism was strongest and most passionately supported never had many elected representatives. One Democratic paper in Louisiana stated the case with the utmost frankness: "It is the religious duty of Democrats to rob Populists and Republicans of their votes whenever the opportunity presents itself. . . . Rob them! You bet! What are we here for?"⁴⁶

Some of the most effective electoral support for Populism came from the silver-mining states of the West. This was a mixed blessing, however. As time was to show, the silver states, miners and mine owners alike, were concerned with one overriding issue, free coinage of silver, and they fixed their eyes on this to the exclusion of the rest of the Omaha platform.

Populists might be disappointed and politicians unnerved by the results of the 1892 elections, but neither

could doubt that the People's Party had arrived in politics. Having done so, however, where was it to go? Between then and the next Presidential election year, 1896, the Populists found themselves caught in the classic radical dilemma. Should they stick to their whole platform, recognizing that they had no immediate prospect of political success, and that to convert the nation to their beliefs must take many years? Or should they be willing to compromise, to give up some of their policies in order to attract allies who would give them a chance of power in the near future? Different elements in the party, ex-Republicans and ex-Democrats, professional politicians and grass-roots Alliance men, radicals and silverites, naturally gave very different answers. The tactical dilemma, upon the horns of which the People's Party eventually tore itself to pieces, was made more acute by events which strengthened the arguments on both sides of the question. These were the economic depression of 1893 and the enormously costly financial strategy to which the government resorted in order to maintain its gold reserves.

In many ways the crisis strengthened the radical argument that the interests of the people—that is, of the producers—were being sacrificed for the sake of orthodox financial policies that benefited none except bankers and plutocrats. Farm prices for cotton, corn, and wheat fell below the cost of production, driving more and more farmers into debt, foreclosure, and misery. Unemployment in the cities gave rise to armies of tramps, like those led to Washington in 1894 by the Populist Jacob Coxey. Coxey attempted to deliver an address to Congress “on

behalf of millions of toilers,” and called for a program of public works to provide employment, to be financed by the issue of paper money. He declared in an oration before the Capitol, “We choose this place of assemblage because it is the property of the people”—only to be arrested for “walking on the grass.”⁴⁷

One of the few Populists in office, Governor Lewelling of Kansas, expressed official sympathy with the unemployed in what came to be known as his “Tramp Circular” of 1893, addressed to the boards of police commissioners in his state, in which he exhorted the police to stop harassing vagrants, declaring, “Let simple poverty cease to be a crime.”⁴⁸

During the bitterly fought industrial conflicts of the depression years, such as the Pullman strike of 1894, Populists supported the labor leaders and denounced government action against them. For good measure, they balanced their support for productive workers of all descriptions by attacks on the heartless extravagance of the rich. There was a description, for instance, in James Weaver's book, *A Call to Action*, of a “swan dinner” costing ten thousand dollars given at Delmonico's in New York, at which the centerpiece was a real lake thirty feet long, with real swans swimming in it.⁴⁹ Evidently the Populist view of politics as a struggle between the producers and the idle rich was sufficiently widely shared to give some of the upper crust a fright: “In Indianapolis, a ruche-collared lady measured the political situation and went off to see the cathedrals of Europe. ‘I am going to spend my money,’ she said, ‘before those crazy people take it.’”⁵⁰

But the lady need not have worried. The radical alliance between rural and urban producers never came to much, partly through lack of response from the most powerful labor leaders of the time.⁵¹ Meanwhile, a quite different alliance was becoming increasingly likely. For that same depression and that same goldbug strategy which appeared at first sight to support the rhetoric of the radical Populists also strengthened and united the silver lobby, and made elements within the Democratic Party more ready to respond to it.

Ever since the "Crime of '73," when silver had been demonetized, there had been pressure from the silver-mining states of the West for the restoration of a silver currency, and governments had periodically passed relief acts of a limited kind. One of these, the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890, which required the government to buy 54 million ounces of silver a year, was repealed by President Cleveland and Congress at the height of the gold panic in 1893, after a Congressional battle in which the opposition was led by the Populist William Allen in the Senate and the Democrat William Jennings Bryan in the House.

Already in 1889 the silver-mine owners had founded the American Bimetallic League to press for free coinage of silver, and after the repeal of the Sherman Act they stepped up their agitation. On the silver payroll was a talented publicist named William Harvey, whose pamphlet, *Coin's Financial School*, published in 1894, was a brilliant tour de force of popularization. Harvey harnessed Populist sentiments to the cause of free silver, having his young "Professor Coin" argue, for instance,

that silver "was so much handled by the people and preferred by them, that it was called the people's money. Gold was considered the money of the rich."⁵²

Free silver was, of course, one of the many planks in the Populists' Omaha platform, and was a version of inflationary money policy that many farmers found easier to swallow than Greenback theories. Consequently, when their candidates in Western states performed disappointingly in the elections of 1894, some influential Populists began to argue in favor of dropping the party's more controversial policies and forming a common front with all silverites, who were becoming particularly conspicuous in the Democratic Party. This strategy appealed particularly to the officeholders in the party who were naturally more concerned about the short-term objective of winning the next election than were the rank and file.⁵³ From a tactical point of view, however, it could reasonably be argued that this was the most promising way toward the formation of an effective reforming coalition.

More radical Populists fought hard against the strategy of fusion, predicting (correctly) that it would destroy the party:

O, come into my party, said the spider to the fly—
Then he sharpened up his pencil and winked the other eye.
The way into my party is across a single plank—
You can take it from your platform, the rest can go to—blank.⁵⁴

The issue of whether or not to engage in tactical fusion with the old parties was one that had continually confronted Populists at state level, and had been resolved in various ways, with Southern Populists sometimes fusing

with Republicans, and Westerners with Democrats, while purists who called themselves "midroaders"⁵⁵ tried to avoid deals of any kind. Fusion at national level with Democrats was a much more difficult proposition. While it might seem eminently sensible to Westerners, it was anathema to Southern Populists. Men like Tom Watson of Georgia had created their party in bitter conflict with their local Democratic oligarchies, daring ostracism and violence to do so. It was not to be expected that they would take kindly to cooperating with their enemies for nothing more than free silver.

The whole problem came to a head in July 1896 when the Democratic Party, meeting in Chicago, unexpectedly nominated William Jennings Bryan as its Presidential candidate on a free silver platform. The Populist convention met in St. Louis immediately afterward to face an agonizing decision. For the Democrats had stolen the Populists' clothes. In the course of their fight to keep the South out of Populist hands, they had veered in a Populist direction. Not only had they adopted the free silver plank and added to their platform various Populist items such as support for an income tax and federal control of railways; above all, they had chosen a candidate of Populist style and sympathies. Bryan, later to become known as the Great Commoner, had a long record of cooperation with the People's Party. In the Presidential campaign of 1892, indeed, he had campaigned for Weaver rather than for Cleveland, the leader of his own party, while Weaver and Mrs. Lease had helped him in his campaign for Congress.⁵⁶ Himself the product of a Western rural background, sharing the evangelical Protestantism and faith in the common people that were strong elements in Popu-

lism, Bryan's rhetoric was indistinguishable from that of genuine members of the People's Party: "I am proud to have on my side in this campaign the support of those who call themselves the common people. If I had behind me the great trusts and combinations, I know that I would no sooner take my seat than they would demand that I use my power to rob the people on their behalf."⁵⁷

Should the Populists support Bryan, too? But the Omaha platform, which was the clearest expression of Populist principles, contained a great deal besides free silver, while all that Populists distrusted about the Democratic Party was symbolized by Bryan's chosen running mate Arthur Sewall, an Eastern bank president and railway director—a plutocrat whose only redeeming feature was his support for silver.

After a bitter struggle the Populist convention arrived at an awkward solution, giving its Presidential nomination to Bryan but nominating Tom Watson for Vice-President instead of Sewall, in spite of Bryan's known lack of enthusiasm for such an arrangement. The resulting confusion and recriminations did nothing to help Bryan's campaign. Many Western Populists worked for him enthusiastically, but most Southerners balked at helping the Democrats who had so often robbed them of votes, while in Texas, the original home of Populism, intransigent midroaders threatened to vote for the Republican McKinley rather than compromise with the Democrats.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, the Republicans fought a massively financed and unscrupulous campaign, in which the danger of support for Bryan among industrial workers was averted by tactics such as threatening to close down businesses and

sack workers if he should win.⁵⁹ In the event Bryan lost the election, so that the Populists discovered that they had destroyed their party for nothing. Arguments about whether Populism was betrayed by its leaders have continued ever since.⁶⁰ Ironically, the years after 1896, when the remnants of the People's Party were limping into obscurity, saw a revival of economic prosperity, caused partly by the very thing Populists had been demanding—a rise in the volume of the currency. The cause, however, was neither free coinage of silver nor the issue of Greenbacks, but a sudden rise in gold production consequent upon the discoveries of new gold fields and new extraction processes.⁶¹

POPULISM AND THE HISTORIANS

Interpretation of the U.S. Populist movement is deeply controversial. It is true, though trite, that each age rewrites its history to suit its preoccupations, and Populist historiography was dramatically affected by McCarthyism and the shock it gave to the American academic world.⁶² The classic history of Populism, which held the field for many years, was John D. Hicks's generally sympathetic study, *The Populist Revolt*, which appeared in 1931.⁶³ Hicks interpreted Populism as a response to real agrarian grievances in the West and South, and maintained that although the movement failed, the Populists had been vindicated by history. Many of their policies, though too advanced for the 1890s, had been implemented since. Hicks gave the impression that the movement was a healthy political phenomenon, entitled to praise from the point of view of a more advanced age.

This sort of relaxed and rather patronizing attitude to the Populists became more difficult as American intellectuals reeled under the impact of mid-twentieth-century mass movements. Even before World War II, liberal democrats had been forced to recognize that totalitarian movements like Nazism and fascism could attract a great deal of popular support. But until the advent of Senator Joseph McCarthy such problems seemed, on the whole, rather distant. It was the reign of terror carried on by the Senator in the early 1950s, apparently with popular approval, that forced upon many American intellectuals a sense of acute separation between their own liberal cultural milieu and the gullible, intolerant masses.⁶⁴ This new fear of the masses generated new and hostile interpretations of Populism, which was now seen as a dangerously proto-fascist mass movement.⁶⁵

The most influential revised version of Populism was that put forward in Richard Hofstadter's widely read book, *The Age of Reform*.⁶⁶ While conceding much good in the movement, Hofstadter chose to concentrate his attention on blemishes in the Populist outlook which he enumerated as "the idea of a golden age; the concept of natural harmonies; the dualistic version of social struggle; the conspiracy theory of history; and the doctrine of the primacy of money."⁶⁷ Populists, according to Hofstadter, were haunted, terrified people, left behind by industrialization, who seized eagerly upon the notion of a financial conspiracy as the explanation for their ills, and on free silver as the panacea to cure them. When their hopes of the People's Party were dashed, they were easily converted to the jingoistic nationalism of the nineties.

Hofstadter's unflattering picture of Populism seemed

to regard the movement as a kind of political neurosis, and to reduce the patients' statements and programs to symptoms unworthy of rational attention. His views, and those of other hostile critics, provoked sharp reactions from scholars more favorable to Populism. Some demonstrated that the Populists had not evinced irrational hostilities, and had an unusually liberal record on matters like racism.⁶⁸ Others pointed out that, far from harking back to the agrarian and antistate traditions of Jefferson and Jackson, Populist programs were radical if not socialist in their demands for government action. Norman Pollack argued, for instance,⁶⁹ that the Populists should be regarded as notable progressives, since they offered a critique of modern industrial society comparable with Marxism.

Much of the controversy has concerned itself with the question of whether Populism was "progressive" or "reactionary." One scholar states the issues thus:

Was Populism on the whole a rational and forward-looking response to the end of the frontier and the rise of industrialism, thrusting crucial issues upon the reluctant major parties and advancing remedies that for the most part eventually won acceptance? Or was it a preposterous rustic mutiny infested with cranks and visionaries, looking back to a mythical golden (or silver) age of the Jackson era and offering only wild monetary schemes or scapegoats as the response to exaggerated evils?⁷⁰

More recently the terms of debate have shifted, reflecting the changing preoccupations of a new generation of scholars. Belief in progress and fondness for irrationalist sociological explanations have simultaneously gone out of

favor, while the participationist enthusiasms of the 1960s and 1970s have cast a new aura of dignity over grass-roots movements of the past. Some recent studies of American Populism show the effects of these new perspectives. Robert C. McMath, Jr.'s history of the Southern Alliance, *Populist Vanguard*, explicitly adopts the rationalist viewpoint of Mancur Olson in discussing the rise and fall of the Alliance,⁷¹ while Peter H. Argersinger in *Populism and Politics* and Lawrence Goodwyn in *Democratic Promise* both focus on the contrast between the participatory grass-roots origins of Populism and the elite politicking in which it expired.

Goodwyn's interpretation is particularly significant because his book is a full-length study designed to supplant Hicks as the standard work on the subject. He claims that most accounts have followed Hicks in placing too much emphasis on the movement in Northern states such as Nebraska and on what he calls the "shadow movement" which emerged in that region. This Bryanite, silver-oriented faction was, he maintains, only the shadow of the real substance of Populism, which was concentrated in the South and in Kansas. The significance of this "real" Populism lay not in the activities of its leaders, not even in its official programs, but rather in the experience of democratic politics which ordinary farmers gained in their Alliances and cooperatives: "To describe the origins of Populism in one sentence, the cooperative movement recruited American farmers, and their subsequent experience within the cooperatives radically altered their political consciousness."⁷² Participation in this "cooperative crusade" opened the farmers' eyes and altered their views.

It made them aware, for one thing, of the structure of economic power in American society. Goodwyn considered that there was nothing paranoid about the "conspiratorial tendencies" discovered by Hofstadter in Populist rhetoric. The farmers were quite right: financial power *was* becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of those who headed the great new corporate monopolies. And when farmers found their cooperative schemes opposed or thwarted by banking or railroad interests, they discovered for themselves where power lay.

But those who participated in Alliances and cooperatives, those who trooped to Populist rallies and participated in Populist parades, also discovered something else. They discovered the self-respect and sense of power that can come from seeing oneself not just as a helpless individual, but as a citizen among others, with collective power to act:

In its deepest meaning, Populism was . . . a cooperative movement that imparted a sense of self-worth to individual people and provided them with the instruments of self-education about the world they lived in. The movement gave them hope—a shared hope—that they were not impersonal victims of a gigantic industrial engine ruled by others but that they were, instead, people who could perform specific political acts of self-determination. . . . Populism was, at bottom, a movement of ordinary Americans to gain control over their own lives and futures, a massive democratic effort to gain that most central component of human freedom—dignity.⁷³

According to this interpretation, the most significant feature of Populism was not an ideology or even a specific set of proposals, but an *experience* of democratic partici-

pation in politics. This movement, springing from the grass roots and gradually articulating a political world view, brought to thousands of ordinary Americans the sense that they, "the plain people," were capable of acting together to free themselves from the bonds they felt so oppressively in their individual lives. As they acted in this way their view of the world changed, they acquired a different sense of what was possible and what was or was not inevitable.

It is clear that, like its rivals, Goodwyn's interpretation has a political ax to grind. His account of Populism as the grass-roots rediscovery of what democracy means stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from those accounts dating from the McCarthy era which presented it as a proto-fascist rising of the irrational and dangerous masses. As we shall constantly have occasion to note, the same range of variation occurs in the interpretation of populism in general, not just of the American case.

THE POPULIST OUTLOOK

Let us now sum up the U.S. Populists' outlook and comment on it. The first point to be stressed is that the choice of "the People's Party" as a label was not accidental. The heart of the Populist case was their claim to speak for the people, the "plain people" of America. Over and over again they presented their campaign as a struggle between the mass of the people on one side and a few millionaires on the other—or, as one of Governor Lewelling's constituents put it, "the plutocrats, the aristocrats and all the other rats."⁷⁴

The Populists did not think of their movement as a

rural or sectional interest group, but as an uprising of all honest working people. They constantly expressed their sympathy with industrial workers during the bitter labor disputes of the time, and sometimes gave practical support, like the provisions which Kansas farmers sent to the locked-out workers at Andrew Carnegie's Homestead plant.⁷⁵ They liked to point out the impossibility of earning a plutocrat's fortune by honest labor. One Populist calculated that even if a working man could manage to save ten cents from his earnings every day without fail, it would take him 3,750,000 years to accumulate the wealth of John D. Rockefeller, the oil magnate.⁷⁶ In their rhetoric, society is divided into two unequal parts, the honest toilers and the parasites who rob them of their reward:

There are ninety and nine who live and die
 In want, and hunger, and cold,
 That one may live in luxury,
 And be wrapped in a silken fold.
 The ninety and nine in hovels bare,
 The one in a palace with riches rare.⁷⁷

Although the demonic figures of millionaires brood over their rhetoric, Populists always stressed that the impersonal monetary system, rather than any individual villain, was their real oppressor. Isolated farmers and workers were helpless in the face of this system: but by uniting and wielding political power, they believed they could change it. One of the most striking features of their outlook was their faith in the potentialities of a "people's government" and their willingness to contemplate great increases in federal power. A prominent Kansas Populist, Frank Doster, revealed the workings of the Populist mind

when he called for monopolistic enterprises such as the railroads to be taken over by "the government, that is, the people."⁷⁸ "Cyclone" Davis, the Texas lecturer whose speciality it was to ascend the platform loaded down with the works of Jefferson, managed by ingenious reinterpretation to find support for increased governmental activity even in his patron saint.⁷⁹ To alarmed observers, their ideas seemed nothing short of socialism.

The claim to speak for the whole people, millionaires apart; the stress on oppression by a system; and the faith in a "people's government," using "socialistic" measures, to put things right—these are the most pervasive features of American Populist ideology. Let us consider now some of the implications of these ideas.

One of Tom Watson's editorials in the *People's Party Paper*, published in Atlanta in 1892, gives away some of the fundamental ambiguity of Populism. Watson portrays the coming election as a contest between Democracy and Plutocracy: "And on which side shall you be found who read these lines? Will you stand with the people, within the party of the people, by the side of the other wealth producers of the nation—from city and country?"⁸⁰ This is stirring stuff, but its echoes of epic battles against the forces of darkness seem somewhat misplaced. After all, if the People's Party really *did* represent the bulk of the American people as solidly and exclusively as Populists liked to claim, the result must be a foregone conclusion, with scarcely any need to exhort the party's followers to heroic choices. The hard fact is that the People's Party never did gain the support of anything approaching the whole people. Even in the West and South many stuck to their old sectional loyalties.

Recent historians have clarified the picture of which groups in the susceptible regions actually went Populist. In Kansas, not surprisingly, there was a high correlation between the proportion of farm mortgages in a county and the strength of the Populist upsurge in 1890,⁸¹ while in Nebraska the typical Populist was, it seems, "a pietistic Protestant who lived on a farm in the central part of the State."⁸² Robert McMath maintains that Southern farmers were most strongly disposed to radicalism in frontier or quasi-frontier regions; it was in the more recently settled upland areas of the older states that the Alliance was strongest.⁸³ Whether or not Alliance membership was translated into political Populism in the South was of course another matter, depending a great deal on local conditions and personalities. Lawrence Goodwyn suggests, however, that the most important variable was the extent to which farmers had participated in the cooperative movement.⁸⁴ In the East, and in the cities everywhere, Populism never did make much headway, while pure middle-of-the-road Populism was even less generally popular than the watered-down silverite version of 1896. Whether they liked it or not, Populists were a collection of minority groups, not "the people" itself.

Their rhetoric presented a picture of society divided not along ordinary lines of interest or class, but between workers and parasites. This was appealing, but entailed a host of snags. It was, for instance, difficult to apply to actual cases (millionaires apart). The Kansas Farmers' Alliance tried to use such a criterion in drawing up their rules for membership. They were prepared to admit any who "really worked"—a category which apparently in-

cluded not only farmers, laborers, and mechanics but also doctors, preachers, and teachers. But they excluded those who "lived off the labor of others"—under which heading they included bankers, lawyers, speculators, peddlers, commission merchants, etc. Clearly, any such classification must run into impossible distinctions.

The Populist insistence that farmers and industrial workers had the same interests was fraught with similar problems, which were pointed out bluntly by Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor: "To support the People's Party under the belief that it is a *labor* party is to act under misapprehension . . . composed, as the People's Party is, mainly of *employing* farmers . . . there must of necessity be a divergence of purposes, methods and interests."⁸⁵ Gompers was not, perhaps, entirely fair. Many Populists, on family farms with no hired labor, threatened with foreclosure and eviction, cannot have felt much like capitalists, and in some areas there were alliances between farmers and workers.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, it is true that the farmers were bound to have different interests from industrial workers in some crucial respects, with farm prices and the cost of food foremost among them. If the American Populists had succeeded in creating a coalition with organized labor, it might not have held together for long.

Above all, the Populist attempt to draw the significant line of division between workers and producers foundered upon sectional and ethnic hostilities. Although many Southern Populists, black and white, made heroic efforts to unite "the people" across racial lines against "the monopolies," prevailing taboos were too strong for them,

and it is not altogether incomprehensible that Tom Watson, the Georgia Populist leader, should have declined into a racialist in his embittered later years.⁸⁷ As populists in other times and places have found, the definition of "the people" that carries most resonance as a rallying cry is very often an ethnic, not an economic one.

The combination of attempted alliances with labor and demands for government intervention in the economy naturally led to the Populists being charged with "socialism." This is not, however, a very appropriate designation. It is true that there were some in the movement to whom the label really could be applied, notably Henry Demarest Lloyd, the radical intellectual who was one of the main forces behind the attempt in 1894 to capture Chicago with a Populist-labor alliance.⁸⁸ Even in Lloyd's case, however, the ideological stress was less upon the collectivist charms of a socialist utopia than on the familiar Populist battle between people and plutocrats. His celebrated book, *Wealth against Commonwealth*, first published in 1894, is a massively documented muckraking account of the evil practices of monopolist corporations, especially Standard Oil.⁸⁹

Where the rank and file of the movement were concerned, the scope and limits of their "socialism" were quite clear. They grew staples—wheat or cotton—for international markets, and their dependence upon a market over which they had no control perfectly explains their intense concern with monetary systems, transport, and government regulation. Inextricably involved in a vast commercial network, they thought of a people's government as the only agency strong enough to defend

their interests. Collectivism on any more extensive scale did not appeal to them, however. Their ideal was still the independent proprietor, hard-working but secure on his farm. They desired a large measure of government action to protect this independent producer, but not to replace him with any more large-scale and collective system of production.

It is interesting to look at the Populist utopia with which Ignatius Donnelly concluded his apocalyptic novel, *Caesar's Column*. After the entire civilized world has been destroyed in the last war between the plutocrats and the people, a remnant survive, walled up in an idyllic republic in the mountains of Uganda. The government there owns all the roads, rails, mines, and telegraph, provides education, health care, and entertainment ("concerts and lectures"), settles wages and prevents usury—a fairly socialistic program. However, Donnelly emphasizes that land and business remain in private hands, subject only to upper limits to prevent the emergence of the plutocrats who had wrecked America.

The American Populists were not, therefore, socialist in their view of private property, although they showed a remarkable enthusiasm for action by the central government, provided that government were kept in the hands of the people. The devices they proposed to ensure this included direct election of senators by the people, an effective secret ballot, and the use of popular initiatives and referendums. Once these were in operation, there would be no need to restrict unduly the powers of government. To quote the self-styled Jeffersonian, Cyclone Davis: "There is a proper limit at which government

should stop. But in a government which is organized as ours, by the people for their own good, there need be no fear so long as the power is kept in the hands of the people."⁹⁰

Although the Populist movement was of course both an economic and a political phenomenon, it is possible to distinguish between two different aspects of it which correspond to the two basic perspectives adopted by analysts of populism in general. It was, on the one hand, a particular kind of agrarian movement with a rather specific socioeconomic base and a distinctive program: it was, in fact, a classic case of farmers' radicalism.⁹¹ Besides being a socioeconomic phenomenon, however, Populism also had a prominent political aspect as a grass-roots revolt against the elite of plutocrats, politicians, and experts. Populists were passionately democratic, evincing a Jacksonian faith in the common man and a stress on popular control over government. As we have seen, interpretations of the movement have been strongly colored by reactions in intellectual circles to this kind of radical democracy.

We shall return later to these political aspects of populism and the problems to which the relation between people and elite gives rise. For the moment, however, let us turn to another classic populist movement that was also, in its very different way, a form of agrarian radicalism: Russian revolutionary populism. As we shall see, *narodnichestvo* also raised questions about the relation between the people and the elite, though from an entirely different angle.

2. Russian Populism

Before each revolutionary socialist stands the practical demand: sacrifice yourself, sacrifice everything in order to create the kingdom of justice: sacrifice yourself, sacrifice everything in order to bring its existence one day nearer.—*Lavrov*¹

Go to the people, there is your way, your life, your learning. . . . Young men of education must become not the people's benefactors, not its dictators and guides, but merely a lever for the people to free itself, the unifier of the people's own energies and forces. To gain the ability and right to serve the cause, youth must submerge itself and drown in the people.—*Bakunin*²

THE SETTING

The notion of "the people" as distinct from a collection of individuals or groups is one of those collective ideas that make sense only through an implied contrast with something else. In the United States, for instance, while cooperation and political activity might generate a feeling of solidarity among those who took part in them, it was above all the contrast between the Eastern strongholds of politicians and plutocrats and the peripheral regions of the South and West that made "the people" effective