THE POPULIST MOMENT

A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America

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The Irony of Populism

"The People" vs. "The Progressive Society"

The foundations of modern America were constructed out of the cultural materials fashioned in the Gilded Age. The economic, political, and moral authority that "concentrated capital" was able to mobilize in 1896 generated a cultural momentum that gathered in intensity until it created new political guidelines for the entire society in twentieth-century America. Not only was previously unconsolidated high ground captured in behalf of the temporary needs of the election of 1896, but the cultural tactics tested and polished during the course of the campaign for "honest money" set in place patterns of political conduct that proved to be enduring. After McKinley's impressive victory in 1896, these patterns became fully consolidated within the next generation of the Progressive era and proved adequate during a brief time of further testing during the New Deal. They have remained substantially unquestioned since, and broadly describe the limits of national politics in the second half of the twentieth century. The third party movement of the Populists became, within mainstream politics, the last substantial effort at structural alteration of hierarchical economic forms in modern America.* Accordingly, twentieth-century American

*The point, here, of course, is that the liberal and socialist alternatives discussed in this concluding chapter were, respectively, either not substantive or were culturally isolated and outside the mainstream of American political dialogue.

reform has in a great many ways proven to be tangential to matters the Populists considered the essence of politics. This reality points to the continuing cultural power exerted by the political and economic values which prevailed in the Gilded Age and which today serve to rationalize contemporary life and politics to modern Americans.

The narrowed boundaries of modern politics that date from the 1896 campaign encircle such influential areas of American life as the relationship of corporate power to citizen power, the political language legitimized to define and settle public issues within a mass society yoked to privately owned mass communications and to privately financed elections, and even the style through which the reality of the American experience—the culture itself—is conveyed to each new generation in the public and private school systems of the nation. In the aggregate, these boundaries outline a clear retreat from the democratic vistas of either the eighteenth-century Jeffersonians or the nineteenth-century Populists.

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Understandably, during such a moment of cultural consolidation priorities were not quickly isolated or identified; it took awhile for the full implications of the era to become evident. But the power of the hegemony achieved in 1896 was perhaps most clearly illustrated through the banishment of the one clear issue that animated Populism throughout its history—the greenback critique of American finance capitalism. The "money question" passed out of American politics essentially through self-censorship. This result, quite simply, was a product of cultural intimidation. In its broader implications, however, the silencing of debate about "concentrated capital" betrayed a fatal loss of nerve on the part of those Americans who, during Populism, dared to speak in the name of authentic democracy. Since the implications were so huge, a brief recital of some relevant specific details seems in order.

The enormous success of *Coin's Financial School* induced goldbugs to counterattack in 1895–96 through the writings of a

University of Chicago economist named J. Laurence Laughlin. Laughlin produced not only theoretical works but also books, articles, and pamphlets for popular consumption. His widely syndicated newspaper column imparted an aura of scholarly prestige to the sound money cause, though his journalistic efforts, like his other writings, were almost as conceptually flawed as "Coin" Harvey's efforts. Yet Laughlin's campaign in behalf of the gold standard drew no critics outside the ranks of Populism, for the nation's university faculties were solidly "goldbug." Among respectable elements of American society, greenback doctrines were culturally inadmissible.

However, in 1896 a young Harvard economist, Willard Fisher, decided he personally had endured enough of the currency theories of both "Coin" Harvey and Professor Laughlin. One of the nation's better-informed students of monetary systems, Fisher penned a biting attack on the two competing advocates of metallic-based currencies. Entitled " 'Coin' and His Critics," Fisher's article appeared in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* in January 1896. Fisher treated with gentle tolerance "Coin" Harvey, whose writings, while badly "flawed," nevertheless produced a number of insights that were "intelligent." He reserved his harsher adjectives for goldbugs, and particularly for his academic colleague, Professor Laughlin. The latter, among other things, was "wrong." In the aggregate, the sheer momentum of Fisher's critique of the arguments of goldbugs and silverites carried him dangerously close to an inferential endorsement of the greenback heresy. No academic *enfant terrible*, Fisher cautiously stepped around this pitfall with an oblique reference to a scholarly alternative to metallic-based currencies—one he euphemistically described as "the familiar tabular system." The reference was cordial, but ultimately noncommittal. Beyond such obscurantism the young professor dared not venture. Though a metallic currency was not an intelligent system of money, Fisher declined to say what was. The word "greenback" was avoided throughout his article. Coupled with the routine orthodoxy that ruled elsewhere in the academic world, the extreme circumspection of the Harvard economist tellingly measured the power of the cultural consolidation at that moment

being fashioned in America. Certain ideas about the economy, no matter how buttressed with evidence and interpretive skill, had become dangerous.

Though the gold standard was formerly legislated into law in 1901 over scattered and desultory opposition, the financial panic of 1907 convinced the Eastern banking community of the need for a more flexible currency. J. Laurence Laughlin, having proved his mettle in 1896, received the blessings of large commercial bankers and was once again pressed into service, this time as the nation's foremost spokesman for "banking reform." Laughlin and two associates wrote the Federal Reserve Act, which was enacted into law in 1913. The measure not only centralized and rationalized the nation's financial system in ways harmonious with the preferences of the New York banking community, its method of functioning also removed the bankers themselves from the harsh glare of public view. Popular attention thenceforth was to focus upon "the Fed," not upon the actions of New York commercial bankers. The creation and subsequent development of the Federal Reserve System represented the culminating political triumph of the "sound money" crusade of the 1890's.

These developments abounded in irony. The panic of 1907 corroborated an essential feature of the analysis behind Charles Macune's sub-treasury system, for the crisis partly materialized out of the inability of a contracted currency to provide adequate capital markets during the autumn agricultural harvest. Throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, calls on Eastern banks by Western banks for funds to move the autumn crops had created stringent shortages within the entire monetary system. While this condition worked to depress agricultural prices—and was not without its benefits to bankers in the matter of interest rates—the banking system itself broke down under these and other burdens in 1907. The demand for a more flexible currency that issued from the banking community following the panic of 1907 was oriented not to the needs of agriculture, however, but rather to the requirements of the banking community itself. Thus, while the 1912 report of the blue-ribbon National Monetary Commission

recommended new legislation establishing adequate credit for the nation's farmers, the Federal Reserve Act written by Laughlin and his associates failed to follow through. Though proponents of the Federal Reserve System often described the twelve regional banks established by the act as "cooperative banks" specifically designed to meet the impasse in agricultural credit—a description particularly prominent during public discussion of the enacting legislation—they were not, in fact, so designed. The Act provided easier access to funds only for the nation's most affluent farming interests.

The Federal Reserve System worked well enough for bankers in the ensuing years, but its failure to address the underlying problems of agricultural credit became obvious to all during its first decade of operation. The severe agricultural depression of 1920–21 once again focused public attention on the problem, leading to a marginal expansion of government policies through the establishment in 1923 of federal intermediate credit banks. But the 1923 amendments effectively extended the aid only to the agricultural middle class. In no sense were the credit problems of the "whole class" touched upon in ways that Charles Macune and other Populist greenbackers would have respected. Not until the farm loan acts of the New Deal did the nation directly address the credit requirements of the family farmer. Unfortunately, unlike the Macunite plan of making direct, low-cost government loans not only to aid farmers but as a competitive pressure on bank interest rates generally, the system of New Deal government loans operated wholly through commercial banks. It thus served as an artificial prop for the prevailing financial system. In any event, by the time of the New Deal legislation, literally half the farmers in the cotton belt and the Western granary had long since been forced into landless peonage and were effectively beyond help.

A final irony was implicit in these developments—and had they lived to see it, it was one that might have proved too much for old-time greenbackers to bear. The collective effect of twentieth-century agricultural legislation—from the Federal Reserve Act of 1913 to the abrupt ending of the Farm Security Administration's land relocation program in 1943—was to

assist in the centralization of American agriculture at the expense of the great mass of the nation's farmers. The process of extending credit, first to the nation's most affluent large-scale farming interests, and then in the 1920's to sectors of the agricultural middle class—while at the same time denying it to the "whole class" of Americans who worked the land—had the effect of assisting large-unit farming interests to acquire title to still more land at the expense of smallholders. Purely in terms of land-ownership patterns, "agri-business" began to emerge in rural America as early as the 1920's, not, as some have suggested, because large-scale corporate farming proved its "efficiency" in the period 1940 to 1970. In essence, "agri-business" came into existence before it even had the opportunity to prove or disprove its "efficiency." In many ways, land centralization in American agriculture was a decades-long product of farm credit policies acceptable to the American banking community. The victory won by goldbugs in the 1890's thus was consolidated by the New Deal reforms. These policies had the twin effects of sanctioning peonage and penalizing family farmers. The end result was a loss of autonomy by millions of Americans on the land.

In a gesture that was symbolic of the business-endorsed reforms of the Progressive era, William Jennings Bryan hailed the passage of the Federal Reserve Act in 1913 as a "triumph for the people." His response provided a measure of the intellectual achievements of reformers in the Progressive period. Of longer cultural significance, it also illustrated how completely the idea of "reform" had become incorporated within the new political boundaries established in Bryan's own lifetime. The reformers of the Progressive era fit snugly within these boundaries—in Bryan's case, without his even knowing it. Meanwhile, the idea of substantial democratic influence over the structure of the nation's financial system, a principle that had been the operative political objective of greenbackers, quietly passed out of American political dialogue. It has remained there ever since.

The manner in which the citizens of a democratic society become culturally intimidated, so that some matters of public discussion pass out of public discussion, is not the work of a single political moment. It did not happen all at once, nor was

it part of a concerted program of repression. Martial law was not declared, no dissenting editors were exiled, and no newspapers censored. It happened to the whole society in much the same way it happened to young Willard Fisher at Harvard, silently, through a kind of acquiesence that matured into settled resignation. This sophisticated despair, grounded in the belief that hierarchical American society could, perhaps, be marginally "humanized" but could not be fundamentally democratized, became the operative premise of twentieth-century reformers. Their perspective acquired a name and, rather swiftly, a respectability always denied Populism. In 1900–1930, it was popularly recognized as "progressivism." Later, it became known as "liberalism." In such a way, a seminal feature of the democratic idea passed out of American culture. This rather fateful process was inaugurated during the climactic political contest of 1896.

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Popularly known as the "Battle of the Standards" between gold and silver, the presidential campaign between Bryan and McKinley witnessed the unveiling for the first time in America of the broad new techniques of corporate politics. Under the driving supervision of Ohio industrialist Mark Hanna, unprecedented sums of money were raised and spent in a massive Republican campaign of coordinated political salesmanship. The nation's metropolitan newspapers, themselves in the midst of corporate centralization, rallied overwhelmingly to the defense of the gold standard. Their efforts were coordinated through a "press bureau" established by the Republican leadership. The power of the church added itself to that of the editorial room and the counting house, and the morality of "sound money" and the "nation's honor" temporarily replaced more traditional themes emanating from the nation's pulpits. Cultural intuitions about respectability, civic order, and the sanctity of commerce, augmented by large-scale campaign organizing, coordinated newspaper and publishing efforts, and refurbished memories of Civil War loyalties combined to create a kind of electoral politics never previously demonstrated on so vast a scale. Though

individual pieces of this political mosaic had been well tested in previous elections, the sum of the whole constituted a new political form: aggressive corporate politics in a mass society.

The Democrats responded with something new of their own—a national barnstorming tour by the youthful and energetic Bryan. Though such undignified conduct was considered by many partisans to be a disgrace to the office of the presidency, the silver candidate spoke before enormous crowds from Minneapolis to New York City. The effort seemed merely to spur the Republican hierarchy to ever-higher plateaus of fund-raising, spending, and organization. The nation had never seen a political campaign like it, and, for one heady moment at least, Bryan thought the electorate would react heavily against such self-evident displays of political propagandizing. But Republicans were able to generate such intense feeling against the "anarchistic" teachings of William Jennings Bryan that many modest church-goers as well as industrial captains felt that no sum of money was too great to ensure the defense of the Republic from the ravages of the silverites. Indeed, one of the striking features of the 1896 campaign was the depth to which many millions of Americans came to believe that the very foundations of the capitalist system were being threatened by the "boy orator of the Platte." That was hardly the case, of course—particularly when it came to the nation's currency. A monetary system responsive to the perspectives of commercial bankers was not at issue in 1896; the relationship of the government to bankers on the matter of currency volume and interest rates was not at issue either. In view of the shared faith of both Bryan and McKinley in a redeemable currency, the entire monetary debate turned on a modest measure of hard-money inflation through silver coinage. The narrowness of the issues involved in the "Battle of the Standards" should have put strong emotional responses beyond possibility—yet the autumn air fairly bristled with apocalyptic moral terminology. Indeed, the fervor of the campaign, for both sides, was authentic: the true issues at stake went far beyond questions of currency volume, to a contest over the underlying cultural values and symbols that would govern political dialogue in the years to come.

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A great testing was in process, centering on the relative political influence of two competing concepts—that of "the people" on the one hand and of "the progressive society" on the other. Those phrases were by no means habitually employed in 1896, either as informal appeals or in the capitalized versions of political sloganeering destined to become common in the twentieth century. But the values underlying the concepts authentically guided the campaigns of 1896 in ways that imparted enduring meaning to the outcome of their competition.

When he was not talking specifically about silver coinage, Bryan actually used the idea of "the people" as a centerpiece of many of his political speeches. When in Chicago, he said:

> As I look into the faces of these people and remember that our enemies call them a mob, and say they are a menace to free government, I ask: Who shall save the people from themselves? 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 in their behalf.

To many Americans the idea of "the people" represented the very foundation of democratic politics, and many thousands believed it had genuine meaning in the context of the Bryan campaign. But in 1896 the idea was even more specific, for it described not just "the people" in the abstract but a specific "people's movement" that had pressed itself upon the national consciousness, energized the silverites, and generated the preconditions for reform influence in the Democratic Party. Because it was not clear to the nation that the people's movement itself had been destroyed—its cooperatives crushed and its political party co-opted—Bryan came to symbolize its enduring life. This explained why Clarence Darrow, Eugene Debs, and many other Populists who had no illusions about the healing powers of the silver crusade ultimately came to join the "Great Commoner." They hoped he could rally the people to a new sense of their own prerogative and stimulate them, in L. L. Polk's old phrase, to "march to the ballot box and take possession of the government." To the extent that the silver crusade made much sense at all, it was in this symbolic context. The stirring rhythms of Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech had energized the delegates at the Democratic convention—perhaps he could stir the American people as well. In the autumn of 1896, the hope was there, and this hope gave the Bryan campaign the deepest meaning it possessed.

Given the ballot box potentiality of "the people" as against "the great trusts and combinations," Republicans obviously could not afford to have the campaign decided on that basis. The countervailing idea of the "progressive society" materialized slowly out of the symbolic values embedded in the gold standard. The "sanctity of contracts" and "the national honor," it soon became apparent, were foremost among them. But, gradually, and with the vast distributional range afforded by the Republican campaign treasury, broader themes of "peace, progress, patriotism, and prosperity," came to characterize the campaign for William McKinley. The "progressive society" advanced by Mark Hanna in the name of the corporate community was inherently a well-dressed, churchgoing society. The various slogans employed were not mere expressions of a cynical politics, but rather the authentic assertions of an emerging American world view.

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From a Populist perspective, the contest between "the people" and "the progressive society" was, in a practical sense, wholly irrelevant to the real purposes of the reform movement. Indeed, the narrow controversy over the "intrinsic value" of two competing metallic currencies was an affront to greenbackers. Not that they could do much about it; Populism had ceased to be an active force in American politics from the moment the third party had sacrificed its independent presence at the July convention.

The People's Party was therefore not a causative agent of anything significant that occurred during the frenzied campaign between the goldbugs and the silverites. From James Weaver to

Tom Watson, from Nebraska fusionists to Texas mid-roaders, the People's Party had become a reactive agent, responding as best it could to the initiatives of others. This being far from the proper business of an autonomous democratic movement struggling to break through a hierarchical party system, Populism quietly dissolved in the fall of 1896 as the morale of its two million followers collapsed. Democratic managers treated their Populist "allies" with such studied contempt that, for two months following the summer conventions, Marion Butler, the new Populist national chairman (replacing the discredited Taubeneck) was afraid to officially notify Bryan of his nomination for fear it would be publicly rejected. On the state level, fusion obliterated the party across the South where the standard-bearer of its bitter enemy, the Democratic Party, also graced the top of the Populist ticket. It is necessary to trace the actions of only one man—Tom Watson—during the autumn campaign of Populism to reveal the utter chaos that had descended upon the reform movement in every corner of the nation.

In his inaugural campaign speech in Atlanta early in August, Watson began actively pressuring the Democratic Party to remove Sewall from the ticket: "You cannot fight the national banks with any sincerity with a national banker as your leader." Butler reacted negatively to the speech, not because he wanted Sewall to remain but because he had been intimidated and outmaneuvered by the Democratic national chairman and by the silver lobby and, as a result, had lost a sense of his own prerogatives and those of the party he headed. Butler's course—to "do nothing of doubtful propriety while matters are happily shaping themselves in our favor"—betrayed a fatal lack of political self-confidence. Watson thereupon took a remarkable step that revealed the extent of his mistrust of fusion leaders. In interviews with the New York press, he attacked them publicly.

> If the National Convention at St Louis did not mean that Messrs. Bryan and Watson should be notified, why was a committee appointed to notify them? Why does Senator Allen, the chairman of the Committee, refuse to do what the convention instructed him to do? Is he afraid Mr. Bryan will repudiate our support? If so, our party has a right to know that fact. If Mr. Bryan is ashamed of the votes which are necessary to elect him, we ought to know it.

By the standards of any self-respecting political party, these observations were eminently reasonable. They also were judged by the Republican press of the East to be highly newsworthy, as the intra-party quarrel among Populists had the effect of complicating Bryan's position as well.

Though Marion Butler, understandably, had cooled to the idea of a highly visible Watsonian presence in the fall campaign, the Georgian nevertheless embarked on a trip to Texas and Kansas early in September. The political atmosphere Watson found in Texas was hardly conducive to the kind of "patience and moderation" for which Butler had labored. A Watson intimate reported to Butler from Dallas that "Texas we find ripe for revolt. . . . The Pops are solid here against Bryan and Sewall." Indeed, a substantial number of the Texas third party leaders regarded the Bryan candidacy as a positive evil. Not only were they concerned that Populist support of Bryan would destroy the identity of the third party, but they also believed that the campaign's emphasis on free silver would undermine the basic monetary reforms of Populism. The Texans were so disturbed that they seriously considered the endorsement of McKinley as the "least of evils" in the 1896 campaign. When black Republican leaders in Texas offered to support the Populist state ticket in return for third party support of the Republican presidential ticket, the Texas mid-roaders took the matter under close advisement. Rumors of these discussions were in the air when Watson arrived in the state, and he responded warmly to the convivial Populist environment. "You must burn the bridges if you follow me," he asserted. To wild cheering, he announced his belief in "Straight Populism," for he did "not propose to be carried to one side of the road or the other." The campaign, he added, was "a movement of the masses. Let Bryan speak for the masses and let Watson speak for the masses and let Sewall talk for the banks and the railroads." Sewall was "a wart on the party. He is a knot on a log. He is a dead weight on the ticket." For

good measure, Watson brought Butler and the national fusion leadership of the third party into his line of fire. The Texans, who shared most of those opinions and had a few others of their own, roared their approval.

While the reverberations from this speech rattled through the ranks of the silverites, Watson's itinerary took him to Kansas. There the Populist vice presidential candidate walked into Populist state headquarters under streaming banners that proclaimed, "Bryan and Sewall." As if to heighten the insult, Watson found that the very front of the Populist campaign office was decorated with huge portraits of the two Democrats whom the Kansas party took to be its national standard-bearers. The action in St. Louis by the politician-led Kansas party—one of full public support for Bryan and Sewall—was consummated back home through an arrangement with Democrats who exchanged Populist support of Sewall electors for Democratic support of the Populist state ticket. In speaking in Kansas, Watson was addressing party leaders who had sacrificed him in the name of their own local and state campaigns. The atmosphere was, to say the least, tense. As much as any man in America who responded to the call of reform launched by the Farmers' Alliance, Watson had labored tirelessly in the people's movement. In Kansas in 1896 he gave his answer to the idea of fusion:

> Someone else must be asked to kill that Party; I will not. I sat by its cradle; I have fought its battles; I have supported its principles since organization . . . and don't ask me after all my service with the People's Party to kill it now. I am going to stand by it till it dies, and I want no man to say that I was the man who stabbed it to the heart. . . . No; Sewall has got to come down. He brings no votes to Bryan. He drives votes away from Bryan. . . . My friends, I took my political life in my hands when I extended the hand of fellowship to your Simpsons, your Peffers, your Davises in Georgia. The Georgia Democrats murdered me politically for that act. I stood by your men in Congress when others failed. I have some rights at the hands of Kansas. I have counted on your support. Can I get it?

The Populist audience responded with enthusiasm, pressed around the rostrum, and surrounded his carriage as he prepared

to leave. Touched, Watson wrote his wife, "it is quite apparent that the rank and file of our party in Kansas are all right and will vote against their leaders if they get the chance."

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The Kansas Populists who swarmed around Watson's carriage, like Watson himself, like the old Texas Alliancemen, had too many memories to acquiesce comfortably in the fusion politics of 1896. The spirit of Populism possessed meaning because of these memories. Indeed, collectively, they constituted the essence of the agrarian revolt: memories of farmers on the crop lien bringing food to striking railroad workers; of Alliancemen wearing suits of cotton bagging during the long war against the jute trust in the South; of the great lecturing campaigns to organize the South in 1887–89 and the nation in 1890–91; of mile-long Alliance wagon trains and sprigs of evergreen symbolizing the "living issues" in Kansas; of the formation of the "Alliance Aid" association to bring the Dakota plan of self-help insurance to the full agrarian movement; of Leonidas Polk, the Southern Unionist, announcing the end of American sectionalism to the cheers of Michigan farmers; of a day in Florida, "under the orange and banana trees," when the National Reform Press Association was created; of the time in South Carolina, so brief in that state, when impoverished farmers rebuked Ben Tillman to his face and tried to set a course different from his; of boys carrying torches in country parades for Tom Watson and girls knitting socks for "Sockless" Jerry Simpson; of the sprawling summer encampments that somehow seemed to give substance to the strange, inspiring, ethical vision of Tom Nugent; of John Rayner's lieutenants speaking quietly and earnestly in the houses of black tenants in the piney woods of East Texas; and, perhaps most symbolic of all, of men and women "who stood on chairs and marched back and forth cheering and crying" in response to the initial public reading of the "Second Declaration of American Independence" on a summer day in 1892 in the city of Omaha. It was this spirit—a collective hope for a better future, it seems—that animated American Populism, and it was these vibrant moments of shared effort that provided the evidence of its vitality, its aspirations, and its defeats.

And finding no coherent way to express itself in fusion, it was this spirit that expired in the autumn of 1896. Following his fiery speeches in Texas and his confrontations with the Kansans, Tom Watson sojourned briefly in the citadel of fusion in Nebraska and then, utterly demoralized, went home to Georgia for the remainder of the campaign. As the sole surviving symbol of a national Populist presence, he had become an anachronism. No one knew this more deeply than Watson or understood more fully what it meant for the future of the third party. The 1896 campaign had to do with the mobilization of new customs that were to live much more securely in American politics than the dreams of the Populists. That many of those customs were precisely the ones that so deeply disturbed the agrarian reformers constituted one of the more enduring ironies of the Populist experience.

7

The most visible difference in the efforts of the three parties in 1896 turned on money—not as a function of currency, but rather as the essential ingredient of modern electioneering. The Populist national treasurer wrote despairingly to Marion Butler that he was receiving less than a dozen letters a day containing "twenty-five cents to a dollar" from the demoralized Populist faithful throughout the nation. The Populist national campaign was literally almost penniless, and Butler found it necessary to establish his Washington headquarters in a building housing the political arm of the silver lobby, the National Silver Party. Only a belated, if humiliating, subsidy of $1000 from the Democratic national committee enabled the Populists to keep going until election day.

The Democratic campaign, although elaborately financed by Populist standards, was also run on a shoestring. The Republican press made great capital out of a supposed massive flow of funds from Western silver mineowners cascading into Democratic coffers. But the relatively modest sums that actually materialized went to the lobbying institutions previously created by the mineowners. Democrats worked desperately to place speakers

in the field, but the shortage of money gradually channeled this effort toward the recruiting of self-supporting volunteers. The best educational force for the Democratic cause was Bryan himself. Through the early part of the campaign Bryan was forced to travel by commercial carrier, a circumstance that placed the entire presidential campaign at the mercy of local railroad timetables and earned the "boy orator" considerable ridicule in the goldbug press. The Democratic national committee was ultimately able to provide Bryan with a special train for the closing weeks of the campaign, but the silver crusade never quite lost the ad hoc character that had marked its inception.

In contrast, the massive national campaign for "honest money" engineered by Mark Hanna set a model for twentieth-century American politics. While the Democrats struggled to find volunteer speakers to tour the crucial states of the Midwest, the Republican campaign placed hundreds of paid speakers in the field. Individual contributions from wealthy partisans sometimes exceeded the entire amount the Democrats raised in their national subscription drive. Offerings from corporations, especially railroad corporations, reached even larger sums. Receipts and expenditures soared into the millions.

Mark Hanna presided over both the Chicago and New York campaign operations, coordinating an elaborate system of printing and distribution that involved many millions of pamphlets, broadsides, and booklets. So controlled and centralized was the Republican effort that the Chicago managers also took it upon themselves to assist in the supervision of state and local campaigns. To add a certain heft to their admonitions, the Chicago office dispatched almost a million dollars to various state organizations. The New York headquarters, focusing on the safe Eastern states, reported expenses of an additional $1,600,000.

The nation's new business combinations headquartered in New York largely financed the effort. Standard Oil contributed $250,000, a figure matched by J. P. Morgan. Hanna and railroad king James J. Hill were seen in a carriage "day after day," going from Wall Street to the office of the New York Central and the Pennsylvania railroads. Hanna repeatedly importuned the pres-

ident of New York Life, who just as frequently responded. The corporate contributions mobilized in behalf of the 1896 Republican campaign for McKinley financed America's first concentrated mass advertising campaign aimed at organizing the minds of the American people on the subject of political power, who should have it, and why.

So supported logistically, the cultural politics of 1896 soon unfolded in behalf of the "progressive society." Republican references to the national honor extended to the party's role in the Civil War. The "bloody shirt" waved in 1896; the fading rhythms of Civil War loyalty were evoked with a measure of subtlety, but evoked nevertheless. From his front porch in Canton, William McKinley framed the larger issues in cultural terms that looked to the past.

> Let us settle once for all that this government is one of honor and of law and that neither the seeds of repudiation nor lawlessness can find root in our soil or live beneath our flag. That represents all our aims, all our policies, all our purposes. It is the banner of every patriot, it is, thank God, today the flag of every section of our common country. No flag ever triumphed over it. It was never degraded or defeated and will not now be when more patriotic men are guarding it than ever before in our history.

In such a manner, the Republican Party first and foremost moved to guard its basic constituency—one that had been created by the war and had been solidified by repeated reminders of the patriotism implicit in that initial allegiance. The politics of sectionalism had always served this primary objective—to ensure the party's organic constituency against anything that might hint at wholesale apostasy. But in 1896, with the war receding in time and with elections more and more depending on the votes of people who had grown to maturity since Appomattox, the appeal of the "bloody shirt" was boldly employed toward an even more lasting objective—to merge the Republican Party's past defense of the nation with contemporary emotions of patriotism itself. Such an approach promised to elevate sectional memories to national ones, forging a blend of the American flag and the Grand Old Party that might conceivably cement a bond of enduring vitality.

While William Jennings Bryan talked with passion and imprecision about the free coinage of silver, American flags—literally millions of them—became the symbols of the struggle to preserve the gold standard. McKinley himself became the nation's "patriotic leader." The Republican campaign committee purchased and distributed carloads of flags throughout the country and Hanna conceived the idea of a public "flag day" in the nation's leading cities—a day specifically in honor of William McKinley. "Sound Money clubs" of New York and San Francisco were put in charge of enormous flag day spectacles and supporting organizational work was carried forward with unprecedented attention to detail. When no less than 750,000 people paraded in New York City, the *New-York Tribune* soberly reported—thirty-one years after Appomattox—that "many of those who marched yesterday have known what it is to march in war under the same flag that covered the city in its folds yesterday all day long." In the critical Midwestern states, Civil War veterans known as the "Patriotic Heroes" toured with buglers and a cannon mounted on a flatcar. Slogans on the train proclaimed that "1896 is as vitally important as 1861." So effective was the Republican campaign that frustrated Democrats found it difficult to show proper respect for the national emblem without participating in some kind of public endorsement of McKinley. Inevitably, some Democrats tore down Republican banners—the American flag. Such actions did not hurt the Republican cause.

McKinley adroitly yoked "free trade" to "free silver" as twin fallacies threatening the orderly foundations of commerce as well as the morality of the Republic. These threats were all "Bryanisms" and collectively they added up to "anarchy." The Republican antidotes thus consisted not merely of "sound money" which protected both the sanctity of contracts and the nation's honor, but equally symbolic appeals to the hope of industrial workers for relief in the midst of a depression. To drive this thought home, only one more slogan had to be added to the litany marshaled by the Republicans. The phrase duly materialized and was affixed to McKinley himself. He became "the advance agent of prosperity." Hanna's New York money and Dawes' Chicago printing presses ensured exposure of the

slogan throughout the nation. It often appeared emblazoned on huge banners flanked by phalanxes of American flags, the entire panoply carried high in the air by uniformed Civil War veterans wearing "sound money" buttons. Such broadly gauged cultural politics completely overwhelmed the vague call for free silver carried to the country by one barnstorming presidential candidate and a few platoons of volunteer Democratic speakers. In sheer depth, the advertising campaign organized by Mark Hanna in behalf of William McKinley was without parallel in American history. It set a creative standard for the twentieth century.

8.

The election itself had an unusual continuity. Some students of the 1896 campaign have concluded that the enthusiasm for Bryan following his "Cross of Gold" speech was such that he would have swept to victory had the election been held in August. After that initial alarm the Republican organization quickly set in place the foundations for the mass campaign that followed, and by October the organizational apparatus assembled by Mark Hanna had clearly swung the balance to the Republicans. Yet the election results appeared fairly close, McKinley receiving 7,035,000 votes to Bryan's 6,467,000. But the Republicans had swept the North. While their margin in the Midwest was not overwhelming, it was a region Cleveland had carried for the Democrats four years before and one Bryan had been supremely confident of winning only a month before the election. Indeed, the results in the Midwest destroyed the party balance that had persisted since the Civil War, thus vastly changing national politics for the forseeable future. In fact, a cataclysm had befallen the Northern Democratic Party. Its progressive symbol in the Midwest, Governor John Peter Altgeld of Illinois, had suffered a surprising defeat, and state party tickets elsewhere in the North had been thrashed. The political appeal supposedly implicit in the idea of "the people" had received a powerful defeat.

It took awhile for the full implications to become apparent. Though it was not immediately noticed, the mature and victorious party of business had muted almost completely the egalitarian ideas that had fortified the party's early abolitionist impulses; the party of "peace, progress, patriotism and prosperity" had become not only anti-Irish, but anti-Catholic and anti-foreign generally. Its prior political abandonment of black Americans had quietly become internalized into a conscious white supremacy that manifested itself through a decreasing mention of the antislavery crusade as part of Republican services to the nation during the Civil War. The assertive party of business that consolidated itself in the process of repelling "Bryanism" in 1896 was, in a cultural sense, the most self-consciously exclusive party the nation had ever experienced. It was white, Protestant, and Yankee. It solicited the votes of all non-white, non-Protestant, or non-Yankee voters who willingly acquiesced in the new cultural norms that described gentility within the emerging progressive society. The word "patriotic" had come to suggest those things that white, Protestant Yankees possessed. This intensely nationalistic and racially exclusive self-definition took specific forms in 1896. The Democratic Party was repeatedly charged with being "too friendly" to foreigners, immigrants, and "anarchists." Indeed, the enduring implications echoed beyond the given tactics of a single campaign to define the restricted range of the progressive society itself. But for many of those who spoke for "the people," and for even greater numbers of the people themselves, no amount of fidelity to the new cultural values could provide entry to that society. While black Americans were to learn this truth most profoundly, its dimensions extended to many other kinds of "ethnic" Americans as well as to a number of economic groups and to women generally. The wall erected by the progressive society against "the people" signaled more than McKinley's victory over Bryan, more even than the sanctioning of massive corporate concentration; it marked out the permissible limits of the democratic culture itself. The "bloody shirt" could at last be laid away: the party of business had created in the larger society the cultural values that were to sustain it on its own terms in the twentieth century.

As an immediate outgrowth of the Bryan campaign, those

who extolled the doctrines of progress through business enterprise acquired a greater confidence, while those who labored in behalf of "the people" suffered a profound cultural shock. A number of the influential supporters of William McKinley, newly secure in their prerogatives after the election, advanced from confidence to arrogance; not only the nation, but the very forms of its economic folkways had become theirs to define. In contrast, a number of the followers of William Jennings Bryan, their idea of America rebuked by the electorate, became deferential, either consciously or unconsciously. The idea that serious structural reform of the democratic process was "inevitable" no longer seemed persuasive to reasonable reformers. Rather, it was evident that political innovations had to be advanced cautiously, if at all, and be directed toward lesser objectives that did not directly challenge the basic prerogatives of those who ruled. The thought became the inherited wisdom of the American reform tradition, passed from one generation to another. A consensus thus came to be silently ratified: reform politics need not concern itself with structural alteration of the economic customs of the society. This conclusion, of course, had the effect of removing from mainstream reform politics the idea of people in an industrial society gaining significant degrees of autonomy in the structure of their own lives. The reform tradition of the twentieth century unconsciously defined itself within the framework of inherited power relationships. The range of political possibility was decisively narrowed—not by repression, or exile, or guns, but by the simple power of the reigning new culture itself.

In the election aftermath, William Jennings Bryan placed the blame for his defeat on the weakness of the silver issue. In the next four years he was to search desperately for a new issue around which to rally "the people" against "the plutocracy." But the decisive shift of voters to the Republican Party that had first occurred in 1894 represented considerably more than a temporary reaction to the depression of 1893. Not only had the new Republican majority been convincingly reaffirmed in 1896, it was to prove one of the most enduring majorities in American political history. Only the temporary split in the Republican Party in 1912 was to flaw the national dominance that began in

1894 and persisted until the Great Depression of the 1930's. In the narrowed political world of the new century, the "Great Commoner" was never to locate his saving issue.

Meanwhile, the unraveling of the fabric of the People's Party between July and November, while fulfilling the predictions of mid-roaders, left little residue other than the bruised feelings and recriminations that Populists inflicted upon one another. Though the Kansas fusionists were rewarded for their efforts by achieving re-election on the joint Democratic-Populist ticket of 1896, it was only at the cost of the deterioration of the third party organization. Even before they could mount another campaign in 1898, Populist spokesmen in Kansas were conceding "the passing of the People's Party" and acknowledging that the agrarian crusade was over. That crusade, of course, had never really come to Nebraska. The stance of the Nebraska third party in 1896—essentially indistinguishable from that of the Nebraska Democratic Party—made the final passing of the vestiges of the Nebraska movement difficult to fix in time. The Nebraska fusion ticket of both 1897 and 1898 was, in any case, dominated by Democrats. In North Carolina, the election reforms passed by the Populist-Republican legislature of 1895 led to the election of number of black Republicans in 1896, setting the stage for a violent Democratic campaign of white supremacy in 1898. Almost total black disfranchisement resulted as the Democratic Party swept triumphantly back into power. In Texas, Populism polled almost a quarter of a million votes in November 1896—indicating that the third party was still growing at the moment its ideological and organizational roots were severed. The margin of Democratic victory was provided through the intimidation of Mexican-American voters and the terrorizing of black voters. Armed horsemen rode through the ranks of Negroes in Populist John B. Rayner's home county in East Texas and destroyed with force the years of organizing work of the black political evangelist. Elsewhere in the South, fusion obliterated the third party. As Watson put it, "Our party, as a party, does not exist any more. Fusion has well nigh killed it."

Pressed to its extremities, the Southern Democracy, "Bryanized" or not, revealed once again that one of its most enduring

tenets was white supremacy. It was the one unarguable reality that had existed before, during, and after the Populist revolt. Whatever their individual styles as dissenters from the Southern Way, Mann Page in Virginia, Marion Butler in North Carolina, Tom Watson in Georgia, Reuben Kolb in Alabama, Frank Burkitt in Mississippi, Hardy Brian in Louisiana, W. Scott Morgan in Arkansas, and "Stump" Ashby in Texas all learned this lesson—as their "scalawag" predecessors had learned it before them. But, as black Americans knew, white supremacy was a national, not just a Southern, phenomenon. The progressive society was to be a limited one.

9

North and South, Republican and Democratic, the triumphant new politics of business had established similar patterns of public conduct. Central to the new ethos was a profound sense of prerogative, a certainty that in the progressive society only certain kinds of people had a right to rule. Other kinds of people, perforce, could be intimidated or manipulated or disfranchised. Students of the 1896 campaign have agreed on the fact of overt employer intimidation of pro-Bryan factory workers into casting ballots for McKinley. The pattern was especially visible in the pivotal states of the Midwest. But the fact that the same customs flourished on an even grander scale in the South, where they were applied by Democrats to defraud Populists and Republicans, pointed to some of the more ominous dimensions of the emerging political exclusiveness. Both major parties were capable of participating in the same political folkways of election intimidation because they were both influenced by the same sense of prerogative at the center of the emerging system of corporate values.

For increasing numbers of Americans the triumph of the business credo was matched, if not exceeded, by a conscious or unconscious internalization of white supremacist presumptions. Coupled with the new sense of prerogative encased in the idea of progress, the new ethos meant that Republican businessmen could intimidate Democratic employees in the North, Democratic

businessmen could intimidate Populists and Republicans in the South, businessmen everywhere could buy state legislators, and whites everywhere could intimidate blacks and Indians. The picture was not pretty, and it was one the nation did not reflect upon. In the shadow it cast over the idea of democracy itself, however, this mode of settling political disputes, or of making money, embedded within the soul of public life new patterns of contempt for alternative views and alternative ways of life. The cost of running for office, coupled with the available sources of campaign contributions and the increasing centralization of news gathering and news reporting, all pointed to the massive homogenization of business politics.

In addition to the banishment of the "financial question" as a political issue, three other developments soon materialized in the wake of the 1896 election to establish enduring patterns for the twentieth century—the rapid acceleration of the merger movement in American industry, the decline of public participation in the democratic process itself, and corporate domination of mass communications. Corporate America underwent periodic waves of heightened consolidation, from 1897 to 1903, 1926 to 1931, and 1945 to 1947. Building upon prior levels of achievement, the process accelerated once again in the 1960's. The "trusts and combinations" that the Populists believed were "inherently despotic" rode out the brief popular clamor for antitrust legislation before World War I. Such largely marginal reforms as were able to run the lobbying gantlet within the United States Congress were vitiated by subsequent Supreme Court decisions. To the despair of antitrust lawyers in the Department of Justice, the combination movement became a historical constant of twentieth-century American life as a structure of oligopoly was fashioned in every major industry. At the same time, "bank holding companies" had fashioned networks of corporate consolidation scarcely imagined by Populist "calamity howlers." Within the narrowed range of political options available to twentieth-century advocates of reform, however, this seminal development within the structure of finance capitalism was not a matter of sustained public debate.

The passing of the People's Party left the Southern Democracy

securely in the hands of conservative traditionalists in every state of the region. There, "election reform" proved to have as many dimensions as "banking reform" did nationally. The process began with the disfranchisement of blacks in Mississippi in 1890 and accelerated after 1896 as state after state across the South legalized disfranchisement for blacks and made voting more difficult for poorer whites. The movement for election reform was accompanied by a marked decline in the relationship of public issues to the economic realities of Southern agriculture, a persistent twentieth-century folkway that contributed to a sharp drop in popular interest in politics among Southerners. In the twentieth century, the voting percentages in the South remained far below the peaks of the Populist decade. Within the narrower permissible limits of public disputation, more and more Americans felt increasingly distant from their government and concluded that there was little they could do to affect "politics." The sense of personal participation that Evan Jones had felt in 1888 when he summoned 250,000 Alliancemen to meet in more than 175 separate courthouses—without notifying anyone in the courthouses—pointed to a kind of intimacy between ordinary citizens and their government that became less evident in twentieth-century America. To Alliancemen, it was *their* courthouse and *their* government.

The demise of the National Reform Press Association, meanwhile, ended a journalistic era that dated back to colonial times, an era that might be characterized as seat-of-the-pants democratic journalism. Volatile, spirited, always opinionated, the one-man journals of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America also provided the nation with a counterforce to any and all orthodoxies. But as centralization came to all phases of American industry, it also came to newspapers. Gradually, inexorably, journalism became a corporate business, one in which competition in ideas inevitably diminished. With mergers and "chains," the newspaper business gradually became, like other aspects of commerce, big business.

The political implications were large. By the last quarter of the twentieth century so intimidated were the nation's print and electronic journalists by the world of corporate power they lived

in and worked for that corporate domination of the United States Congress was not a political fact that "the media" ever succeeded in making clear to the American public. Though corporate domination of the legislative process had been the governing political folkway of every decade of the twentieth century, the fact itself seemed beyond the capacity of modern corporate journalists to report with clarity. Simply stated, the cultural prerequisites for them to do so had not been fulfilled. Granted that the psychological needs of participating in a "free press" were such that owners, editors, and reporters alike occasionally worked zealously at uncovering various influence scandals, the continuing structure of corporate domination was not something that formed the centerpiece of political journalism in the United States.*

While it required a daily exposure only to one six-month session of any American legislature, state or national, to discover the pervasiveness of corporate influence, few Americans were in a position to take six months off from their jobs to acquire the necessary political education. The popular innocence concerning the real structure of parliamentary democracy that resulted from these unperceived power relationships became, in fact, the strongest stabilizing factor supporting the political status quo in the corporate state. With such innocence routinely governing popular perceptions of politics and democracy in America,

* I do not intend here to question the ethics of the nation's journalists; indeed, the point is that their role in this process is a minor one. The substance of American political reporting turns less on the ethics of individual reporters than on the structure of cultural restraints under which they labor. The simple historical fact is that the political values that reporters might impugn are the reigning values of the newspaper and television corporations they work for. These cultural imperatives, while awkward, are unarguably germane to any assessment of post-Populist journalism in America. Given the cultural barriers to journalistic clarity, the individual tenacity required to perform a professional investigative job on congressional lobbying would necessarily create the kind of furor among advertisers that is not conducive to successful newspaper or television careers. The issue is one of power, not ethics. As presently constituted, "news reporting" in the era of the corporate state is a corporate business—inherently hierarchical in form, inherently undemocratic in product. Few Americans know these causal relationships more intimately than the reporters themselves.

"public opinion" became something less than an effective democratic safeguard.

Collectively, these patterns of public life, buttressed by the supporting faith in the inevitability of economic progress, ensured that substantive democratic political ideas in twentieth-century America would have great difficulty in gaining access to the progressive society in a way that approached even the marginal legitimacy achieved by Populist "calamity howlers." The American populace was induced to accept as its enduring leadership a corporate elite whose influence was to permeate every state legislature in the land, and the national Congress as well. A new style of democratic politics had become institutionalized, and its cultural boundaries were so adequately fortified that the new forms gradually described the Democratic Party of opposition as well as the Republican Party of power. A critical cultural battle had been lost by those who cherished the democratic ethos. The departure of a culturally sanctioned tradition of serious democratic reform thought created self-negating options: reformers could ignore the need for cultural credentials, insist on serious analysis, and accept their political irrelevance as "socialists"; or they could forsake the pursuit of serious structural reform, and acquire mainstream credentials as "progressives" and "liberals." In either case, they could not hope to achieve what Populists had dared to pursue—cultural acceptance of a democratic politics open to serious structural evolution of the society. The demonstrated effectiveness of the new political methods of mass advertising meant, in effect, that the cultural values of the corporate state were politically unassailable in twentieth-century America.

10

The socialists who followed the Populists did not really understand this new reality of American culture any more than most Populists did in the 1890's. To whatever extent socialists might speak to the real needs of "the people"—as they intermittently did for two generations—and however they might analyze the destructive impact of the progressive society upon the social

relations and self-respect of the citizenry—as they often did during the same period—the advocates of popular democracy who spoke out of the socialist faith were never able to grapple successfully with the theoretical problem at the heart of their own creed. While the progressive society was demonstrably authoritarian beyond those ways that Thomas Jefferson had originally feared, and while it sheltered a party system that was intellectually in homage to the hierarchical values of the corporate state itself—cultural insights that provided an authentic connecting link between Populism and socialism—the political power centered in "concentrated capital" could not be effectively brought under democratic control in the absence of some correspondingly effective source of non-corporate power. While the Populists committed themselves to a people's movement of "the industrial millions" as the instrument of reform, the history of successful socialist accessions to power in the twentieth century has had a common thread—victory through a red army directed by a central political committee. No socialist citizenry has been able to bring the post-revolutionary army or central party apparatus under democratic control, any more than any non-socialist popular movement has been able to make the corporate state responsive to the mass aspirations for human dignity that mock the pretentions of modern culture. Rather, our numerous progressive societies have created, or are busily creating, overpowering cultural orthodoxies through which the citizenry is persuaded to accept the system as "democratic"—even as the private lives of millions become more deferential, anxiety-ridden, and (no other phrase will serve) less free.

Increasingly, the modern condition of "the people" is illustrated by their general acquiescence in their own political inability to affect their governments in substantive ways. Collective political resignation is a constant of public life in the technological societies of the twentieth century. The folkway knows no national boundary, though it does, of course, vary in intensity in significant ways from nation to nation. In the absence of alternatives, millions have concentrated on trying to find private modes of escape, often through material acquisition. Indeed, the operative standard of progress in both ideological worlds of socialism and

capitalism focuses increasingly upon economic indexes. Older aspirations—dreams of achieving a civic culture grounded in generous social relations and in a celebration of the vitality of human cooperation and the diversity of human aspiration itself—have come to seem so out of place in the twentieth-century societies of progress that the mere recitation of such longings, however authentic they have always been, now constitutes a social embarrassment.

But while the doctrines of socialism have not solved the problem of hierarchical power in advanced industrial society, its American adherents can scarcely be blamed for having failed to build a mass popular following in the United States. Though they never quite achieved either a mass movement or a movement culture that matched the size, richness, and creativeness of the agrarian cooperative crusade, they were, in the aftermath of the cultural consolidation that accompanied the Populist defeat, far more politically isolated than their agrarian predecessors had been. To an extent that was not true of many other societies, the cultural high ground in America had been successfully consolidated by the corporate creed a decade before American socialists, led by Eugene Debs, began their abortive effort to create a mass popular base. The triumphant new American orthodoxy of the Gilded Age, sheltering the two-party system in a dialogue substantially unrelated to democratic structural reform of the inherited economic and social system, consigned the advocates of such ideas to permanent marginality. The Populists have thus been, to date, the last American reformers with authentic cultural credentials to solicit mass support for the idea of achieving the democratic organization of an industrialized society.

But while American socialists, for reasons they themselves did not cause, can be seen in retrospect as never having had a chance, they can be severely faulted for the dull dogmatism and political adolescence of their response to this circumstance. Though their primary recruiting problem turned on their lack of domestic cultural credentials—the working poor wanted justice, but they wanted it as loyal Americans—socialists reacted to continued cultural isolation by celebrating the purity of their "radicalism." Thus, individual righteousness and endless sectarian warfare over ideology came to characterize the politics of a creed rigidified in the prose of nineteenth-century prophets. As a body of political ideas, socialism in America—as in so many other countries—never developed a capacity for self-generating creativity. It remained in intellectual servitude to sundry "correct" interpretations by sundry theorists—mostly dead theorists—even as the unfolding history of the twentieth century raised compelling new questions about the most difficult political problem facing mankind: the centralization of power in highly technological societies. If it requires an army responsive to a central political committee to domesticate the corporate state, socialism has overwhelmingly failed to deal with the question of who, in the name of democratic values, would domesticate the party and the army. In the face of such a central impasse; it requires a rather grand failure of imagination to sustain the traditional socialist faith.

11

As a political culture, Populism fared somewhat better during its brief moment. Third party advocates understood politics as a cultural struggle to describe the nature of man and to create humane models for his social relations. In the context of the American ethos, Populists therefore instinctively and habitually resisted all opposition attempts, through the demagogic expedient of labeling new ideas as "radical," to deflect those ideas from serious discussion. As Populists countered this ploy, they defended the third party platform as "manly and conservative." This Populist custom extended especially to the movement's hard core of lecturers and theorists, who understood the Omaha Platform as a series of threshold demands, to be promptly augmented upon enactment, as the successful popular movement advanced to implement its ultimate goal of a "new day for the industrial millions." In articulating their own social theory; their cause of "education" could advance in step with each stage of democratic implementation, as the "plain people" gained more self-respect from the supportive culture of their own movement and as they gained confidence in their rights as

citizens of a demonstratively functioning democracy. They never found the means to bring the educational power of their movement culture to remotely enough American voters, but if one thing may be said of the Populists, it is that they tried.

Populism in America was not the sub-treasury plan, not the greenback heritage, not the Omaha Platform. It was not, at bottom, even the People's Party. The meaning of the agrarian revolt was its cultural assertion as a people's movement of mass democratic aspiration. Its animating essence pulsed at every level of the ambitious structure of cooperation: in the earnest probings of people bent on discovering a way to free themselves from the killing grip of the credit system ("The suballiance is a schoolroom"); in the joint-notes of the landed, given in the name of themselves and the landless ("The brotherhood stands united"); in the pride of discovery of their own legitimacy ("The merchants are listening when the County Trade Committee talks"); and in the massive and emotional effort to save the cooperative dream itself ("The Southern Exchange Shall Stand"). The democratic core of Populism was visible in the suballiance resolutions of inquiry into the patterns of economic exploitation ("find out and apply the remedy"); in the mile-long Alliance wagon trains ("The Fourth of July is Alliance Day"); in the sprawling summer encampments ("A pentecost of politics"); and, perhaps most tellingly, in the latent generosity unlocked by the culture of the movement itself, revealed in the capacity of those who had little, to empathize with those who had less ("We extend to the Knights of Labor our hearty sympathy in their manly struggle against monopolistic oppression," and "The Negro people are part of the people and must be treated as such").

While each of these moments occurred in the 1890's, and have practical and symbolic meaning because they did occur, Populism in America was not an egalitarian achievement. Rather, it was an egalitarian attempt, a beginning. If it stimulated human generosity, it did not, before the movement itself was destroyed, create a settled culture of generosity. Though Populists attempted to break out of the received heritage of white supremacy, they necessarily, as white Americans, did so within the very

ethos of white supremacy. At both a psychological and political level, some Populists were more successful than others in coping with the pervasive impact of the inherited caste system. Many were not successful at all. This reality extended to a number of pivotal social and political questions beside race—sectional and party loyalties, the intricacies of power relationships embedded in the monetary system, and the ways of achieving a politics supportive of popular democracy itself. In their struggle, Populists learned a great truth: cultures are hard to change. Their attempt to do so, however, provides a measure of the seriousness of their movement.

Populism thus cannot be seen as a moment of triumph, but as a moment of democratic promise. It was a spirit of egalitarian hope, expressed in the actions of two million beings—not in the prose of a platform, however creative, and not, ultimately, even in the third party, but in a self-generated culture of collective dignity and individual longing. As a movement of people, it was expansive, passionate, flawed, creative—above all, enhancing in its assertion of human striving. That was Populism in the nineteenth century.

But the agrarian revolt was more than a nineteenth-century experience. It was a demonstration of how people of a society containing a number of democratic forms could labor in pursuit of freedom, of how people could generate their own democratic culture in order to challenge the received hierarchical culture. The agrarian revolt demonstrated how intimidated people could create for themselves the psychological space to dare to aspire grandly—and to dare to be autonomous in the presence of powerful new institutions of economic concentration and cultural regimentation. The Omaha Platform gave political and symbolic substance to the people's movement, but it was the idea animating the movement itself that represents the Populist achievement. That idea—at the very heart of the movement culture—was a profoundly simple one: the Populists believed they could work together to be free individually. In their institutions of self-help, Populists developed and acted upon a crucial democratic insight: to be encouraged to surmount rigid cultural inheritances and to act with autonomy and self-confidence, individual people

need the psychological support of other people. The people need to "see themselves" experimenting in new democratic forms.

In their struggle to build their cooperative commonwealth, in their "joint notes of the brotherhood," in their mass encampments, their rallies, their wagon trains, their meals for thousands, the people of Populism saw themselves. In their earnest suballiance meetings—those "unsteepled places of worship"—they saw themselves. From these places of their own came "the spirit that permeates this great reform movement." In the world they created, they fulfilled the democratic promise in the only way it can be fulfilled—by people acting in democratic ways in their daily lives. Temporary victory or defeat was never the central element, but simple human striving always was, as three epic moments of Populism vividly demonstrated in the summers of 1888, 1889, 1890. These moments were, respectively, the day to save the exchange in Texas, Alliance Day in Atlanta, when 20,000 farmers massed against the jute trust, and Alliance Day in Winfield, Kansas. Though L. L. Polk made a stirring speech to the Kansans on July 4, 1890 in Winfield, what he said was far less important than what his listeners were seeing. The wagon trains of farm families entering Cowley County from one direction alone stretched for miles. In this manner, the farmers saw their own movement: the Alliance was the people, and the people were together. As a result, they dared to listen to themselves individually, and to each other, rather than passively follow the teachings of the received hierarchical culture. Their own movement was their guide. Fragile as it was, it nevertheless opened up possibilities of an autonomous democratic life. Because this happened, the substance of American Populism went beyond the political creed embedded in the People's Party, beyond the evocative images of Alliance lecturers and reform editors, beyond even the idea of freedom itself. The Populist essence was less abstract: it was an assertion of how people can *act* in the name of the idea of freedom. At root, American Populism was a demonstration of what authentic political life can be in a functioning democracy. The "brotherhood of the Alliance" attempted to address the question of how to live. That is the Populist legacy to the twentieth century.

12

In their own time, the practical shortcoming of the Populist political effort was one the agrarian reformers did not fully comprehend: their attempt to construct a national farmer-labor coalition came before the fledgling American labor movement was internally prepared for mass insurgent politics. Alliance lecturers did not know how to reach the laboring masses in the nation's cities, and, in the 1890's, the labor movement could not effectively reach them either. Though a capacity for germane economic analysis and a growing sense of self developed in those years among American workers, their advances had not, by the time Populism arrived, been translated on a mass scale into practical political consciousness. In the 1890's, growing numbers of American workers were desperately, sometimes angrily, seeking a way out of their degradation, but the great majority of them carried their emotions with them as they voted for the major parties—or did not vote at all. By the time American industrial workers finally found a successful organizing tactic—the sit-down strike—in the 1930's, a sizable proportion of America's agricultural poor had been levered off the land and millions more had descended into numbing helplessness after generations of tenantry. Thus, when the labor movement was ready, or partly ready, the mass of farmers no longer were. That fact constitutes perhaps the single greatest irony punctuating the history of the American working class.

As for the farmers, their historical moment came in the late 1880's. They built their cooperatives, sang their songs, marched, and dreamed of a day of dignity for the "plain people."

But their movement was defeated, and the moment passed. Following the collapse of the People's Party, farm tenantry increased steadily and consistently, decade after decade, from 25 per cent in 1880, to 28 per cent in 1890, to 36 per cent in 1900, and to 38 per cent in 1910. The 180 counties in the South where at least half the farms had been tenant-operated in 1880 increased to 890 by 1935. Tenantry also spread over the fertile parts of the corn belt as an increasing amount of Midwestern farmland came to be held by mortgage companies. Some 49 per cent of Iowa farms were tenant-operated in 1935 and the land

so organized amounted to 60 per cent of the farm acreage in the state. In 1940, 48 per cent of Kansas farms were tenant-operated. The comparable figure for all Southern farms was 46 per cent. But in the South, those who had avoided tenantry were scarcely in better condition than the sharecroppers. An authoritative report written by a distinguished Southern sociologist in the 1930's included the information that over half of all landowners had "short-term debts to meet current expenses on the crop." The total for both tenants and landowners shackled to the furnishing merchant reached 70 per cent of all farmers in the South. As one historian put it, the crop lien had "blanketed" the entire region. As in the Gilded Age, the system operated in a way that kept millions living literally on the wages of peonage.

13

If the farmers of the Alliance suffered severely, what of the agrarian crusade itself? What of the National Farmers Alliance and Industrial Union, that earnest aggregation of men and women who had striven for a "cooperative commonwealth"? And what of the People's Party? Why, precisely, did it all happen, and what is its historical meaning?

As agrarian spokesmen were forever endeavoring to make clear to Americans—indeed, in S. O. Daws's early "history," published in 1887—the cooperative movement taught the farmers "who and where the enemies of their interests were." The Alliancemen who learned that lesson first were the men who had been sent out by the cooperatives to make contact with the surrounding commercial world, men like Daws, Lamb and Macune in Texas, and Loucks and Wardall in Dakota. Though they possessed different political views and different sectional memories, they were altered in much the same way by the searing experience of participating in, and leading, a thwarted hope. They became desperate, defensively aggressive, angry, and creative. They reacted with boycotts, with plans for mutual self-help insurance societies, with the world's first large-scale cooperatives, and with the sub-treasury plan. The marketing and purchasing agents who learned the lessons of cooperation became both movement politicians and ideological men.

They built their cooperatives, developed new political ideas, and fashioned a democratic agenda for the nation. The destruction of the cooperatives by the American banking system was a decisive blow, for it weakened the interior structure of democracy that was the heart of the cooperative movement itself. Though, in one final burst of creativity, the agrarian radicals were able to fashion their third party, that moment in Omaha in the summer of 1892 was the movement's high tide. There was no way a political institution—a mere party—could sustain the day-to-day democratic ethos at the heart of the Alliance cooperative.

And here, among these threads woven through the tapestry of the agrarian revolt, reposes the central historical meaning of Populism. It would, perhaps, constitute a fitting epitaph for the earnest farmers of the Alliance to place these threads in relation to one another and review them a final time. For while they say much about the meaning of the agrarian revolt, they also reveal a great deal about the world Americans live in today and—most important of all—about how modern people have been culturally organized to think about that world. The very appearance of such a pale version of Populism as the shadow movement dramatizes the fact that the Alliance organizers did not, could not, with a wave of the hand overcome all of the American cultural barriers to reform merely by successfully placing their new People's Party upon the stage of national politics in 1892. Indeed, an inspection of what the organizers of Populism did and did not achieve illustrates the elemental difficulties facing serious democratic reformers in any industrial society at any time.

It is clear, for example, that the shadow movement did not emerge merely because of the maneuverings of two amiable Nebraska politicians named Allen and Bryan, nor even because of the demonstrated capacity of silver money to infiltrate an impoverished reform movement. As with all democratic movements in industrial societies, the Populist cause faced hazards that were much more organic than could be revealed by the tactical twists and turns of aggressive office-seekers or aggressive silver magnates.

If the central task of democratic reform involves finding a way to oppose the received hierarchical culture with a newly

created democratic culture, and if, as the Alliance experience reveals, progress toward this culminating climax necessarily must build upon prior stages of political and organizational evolution that have the effect of altering the political perspectives of millions of people, then democratic movements, to be successful, clearly require a high order of sequential achievement. Towering over all other tasks is the need to find a way to overcome deeply ingrained patterns of deference permeating the entire social order. For this to happen, individual self-respect obviously must take life on a mass scale. At the onset of this process for the Populists, small battles (the bulking of cotton) and larger battles (the war with the jute trust) needed to be fought and won so that the farmers attained the beginnings, at least, of collective self-confidence. Arrayed against these democratic dynamics was the continuing cultural authority embedded in received habits of thought, and the readily available ways that the press, the public school, and the church could refortify these inherited patterns. Against such powerful counter-influences, the only defense available to a democratic movement such as the Alliance lay within its own organizational institutions. Interior lines of communication were essential to maintain the embryonic and necessarily fragile new culture of mass self-respect engendered by the reform movement itself. In the absence of such continuing and self-generated democratic cultural influences, the organizers of popular movements inevitably face loss of control over their own destiny. They will be overwhelmed, not by their own party's politicians *per se*, or by passing corporate lobbies, but, more centrally, by the inherited culture itself. Their dreams will vanish into the maw of memory, as their impoverished constituencies, battered on all sides by cultural inducements to conform to received habits, gradually do precisely that. As the Alliance organizers understood, mass democratic movements, to endure, require mass democratic organization. Only in this way can individual people find the means to encourage one another through their own channels of communication—channels that are free from the specialized influences of the hierarchical society they seek to reshape.

In the years in which the National Farmers Alliance and

Industrial Union created, through its cooperative crusade, the movement culture of Populism, this interior channel of communication was centered in the Alliance lecturing system. It was this instrument of self-organization that permitted the hopes of masses of farmers to be carried forward to their spokesmen and allowed the response of the same spokesmen to go back to the "industrial millions." Democratic pressure from below—from crop-mortgaged farmers desperate to escape their furnishing merchants—emboldened the early Alliance leadership to undertake the "joint-note" plan within the centralized statewide cooperative. And tactical democratic strategy from above, in the form of William Lamb's "politics of the sub-treasury," helped raise the political consciousness of many hundreds of thousands of farmers to a level necessary for them to make the personal decision to break with their cultural inheritance and support the new People's Party. The Alliance lecturing system was organic to this democratic message-carrying, to and fro.

As the farmers labored to create a workable infrastructure of mass cooperation in 1887–92, the opposition of the American banking and corporate communities gradually brought home to Alliance leaders, and to masses of farmers, the futility of the cooperative effort—in the absence of fundamental restructuring of the monetary system. The Alliancemen who was forced by events to learn these lessons first—Charles Macune—was the first to brood about this dilemma, and the first to formulate a democratic solution, the sub-treasury land and loan system.

The status that the sub-treasury plan came to have in reform ranks is revealing. For, to put the matter as quietly as possible, Macune's plan was democratic. Or, to put it in archaic political terminology, it was breathtakingly radical. Under the sub-treasury, the power of private moneylenders to decide who "qualified" for crop loans and who did not would have been ended. Similarly, the enormous influence of moneylenders over interest rates would also have been circumscribed. The contracted currency, the twenty-five year decline in volume and prices, would have been ended in one abrupt—and democratic—restructuring. The prosperity levels of 1865 would have been reclaimed in one inflationary—and democratic—swoop. Most

important of all, the sub-treasury addressed a problem that has largely defeated twentieth-century reformers, namely the maldistribution of income within American society. By removing some of the more exploitive features embedded in the inherited monetary system, the sub-treasury would have achieved substantive redistribution of income from creditors to debtors. Put simply, a more democratic monetary system would have produced a more democratic sharing of the nation's total economic production. The "producing classes," no longer quite so systematically deprived of the fruits of their efforts, would have gotten a bit more of the fruits. Hierarchical forms of power and privilege in America would have undergone a significant measure of rearrangement.

As subsequent history was to reveal, these Populistic premises proved to be beyond the conceptual reach of twentieth-century Americans. Restructuring of American banking was not something about which New Dealers or New Frontiersmen could think with sustained attention. The received culture has proved to be so powerful that substantive ideas about a democratic system of money and credit have become culturally inadmissible. Such ideas (the sub-treasury concept of a treasury-based democratic bank will do adequately as an example) are, in the judgment of prevailing cultural authority, "unsound." No one disputes such culturally sanctioned wisdom today, any more than the goldbug simplicities were disputed in "informed" circles during the Gilded Age.

The shrinking parameters of twentieth-century reform thought thus help to underscore the Populist achievement. How was it that so many people in the 1890's came to associate themselves with such an inadmissible idea as the sub-treasury plan? We may be secure in the knowledge that the Populists were not "smarter" than modern Americans. Nor did it happen just because "times were hard." It happened because Populists had constructed within their own movement a specific kind of democratic environment that is not normally present in America. In the face of all the counterattacks employed by the nation's metropolitan press, culturally in step as it was with the needs of "sound-money" bankers, the sub-treasury plan was brought

home to millions of Americans as a function of the movement culture of Populism. This culture was comprised of many ingredients—most visible being the infrastructure of local, county, state, and national Alliance organizations. But this was surface. More real were all of the shared experiences within the Alliance—the elaborate encampments, the wagon trains, the meals for thousands—and more real still were the years of laboring together in the suballiances to form trade committees, to negotiate with merchants, to build the cooperatives to new heights, to discuss the causes of adversity, and, in time, to come to the new movement folkway, the "Alliance Demand." The Demands took on intense practical meaning, first at Cleburne in 1886 and later as the St. Louis Platform of 1889, the Ocala Demands of 1890, and the Omaha Platform of 1892. Because these multiple methods of interior communication existed, Alliancemen found a way to believe in their own movement, rather than to respond to what the larger society said about their movement. In sum, they built insulation for themselves against the received hierarchical culture. Because they did so, the farmers of the Alliance overcame, for a time, their deference; they gained, for a time, a new plateau of self-respect that permitted autonomous democratic politics. Because of this evolution, which was essentially the evolution of Populism, they could dare to have significant democratic aspirations in ways that twentieth-century Americans have rarely been able to emulate—and never on such a scale as Populism. Because the sub-treasury plan promised (effectively, we now understand) to save the Alliance cooperative from banker strangulation, the new monetary system undergirded the cooperative idea: the Omaha Platform of the People's Party preserved the basic dreams of the Farmers Alliance.

But while these conclusions are self-evident in a political sense, and explain how the People's Party happened, they conceal an underlying organizational flaw that eventually undermined the reform movement. For while the cooperative idea awaited the enactment of a new and more democratic system of industrial commerce—the passage by a Populist Congress of the sub-treasury system—the basic cooperative structure of the Alliance

gradually disintegrated. The retrenchment of the Texas Exchange, from a centralized statewide marketing and purchasing credit cooperative to a much smaller cash-only purchasing cooperative, excluded the bulk of cashless Alliance farmers from participation.* The Texas setback of 1889–90 was followed by similar retrenchments at local and statewide levels throughout the South and West in 1890–93. The underlying cause was everywhere the same: lack of access to credit. But in some places, where especially favorable circumstances temporarily bridged the credit problem, cooperatives were destroyed by raw applications of commercial power. The highly successful multi-state livestock marketing cooperative, conceived by Kansans and exported to Missouri, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, was killed by the simple decision of the Livestock Commission in Chicago to refuse to deal with the farmer cooperative. The decision was justified on the ground that the cooperative, in distributing profits to its membership, violated the "anti-rebate" rule of the commission! That was the end of that. But whether the cause of cooperative defeat was the tactical influence of the American financial community, control of access to credit, or simple power, as in the case of the Chicago Livestock Commission, the organizational structure of the Alliance became fatally weakened and the mass cohesion of the movement was, consequently, fatally compromised.

* That fact illustrates in still another way the extent to which traditional class analysis helps to obscure this central dynamic of the Populist movement. It made little difference whether the number of tenants in a given state comprised 15 or 30 per cent of all farmers, or whether all, or half, of the tenants joined the Alliance. The relevant "statistic" was the fact that an overwhelming majority of all farmers, landowners and landless alike, were locked into the crop lien, the discriminatory freight rate and the chattel mortgage.

Rochdale-type cash cooperatives could not help such farmers, whether they still owned their land, were losing their land, had already lost their land, or had never possessed any. If capitalist historians have missed the Populist movement because of reliance on fragile economic determinism (the agrarian revolt resulted from "hard times"), Marxist historians have similarly deluded themselves by easy reliance on class categories (Populism could not be "progressive" because the movement was dominated by "landowners"). One may perhaps be forgiven for suggesting that the manifest lack of creativity in twentieth-century political thought may be at least partly traceable to the remarkable complacency with which categories of political description, sanctioned in the intellectual traditions of socialism and capitalism, are employed as interpretive devices to "explain" historical causation. If these categories do not work to reveal the largest mass movement in nineteenth-century America, it is possible to wonder what else in American history they do not reveal.

All important sectors of commercial America opposed the cooperative movement, not only banks and commission agencies, but grain elevator companies, railroads, mortgage companies, and, perhaps needless to add, furnishing merchants. The National Farmers Alliance itself persisted as an institution, but the cooperative purpose that sustained the personal day-to-day dedication of members to their own institution did not persist. Once the politics of the sub-treasury had been orchestrated through the lecturing system in order to bring on the new party, the lecturing system itself withered. The reason was a basic one; the lecturers no longer had anything substantive to lecture about. The Alliance could no longer save the farmers; only the new party could bring the needed structural changes in the American economic system.

"Lecturing" thus became a function of the People's Party. The new lecturers who provided the continuing internal communications link within the movement culture were the reform editors. The National Reform Press Association was to the People's Party what the lecturing system was to the Alliance, the interior adhesive of the democratic movement. The flaw in all this was the simple fact that the National Reform Press Association did not have an organized constituency, as Alliance lecturers had earlier possessed. Within the People's Party, as it organized itself, there could be no continuing democratic dialogue, no give and take of question and answer, of perceived problem and attempted solution, between rank-and-file members and elected spokesmen, such as had given genuine democratic meaning to the days of cooperative effort within the Alliance. Rather, reform editors asserted and defended the Populist vision, and their subscribers, in organizational isolation, received these views in a passive state, as it were. Such a dynamic undermines the very prospect of sustaining a democratic culture grounded—as it must be to be democratic—in individual self-respect and mass self-confidence. Individual self-respect requires self-assertion, the performance of acts, as farmers performed in

their suballiance business meetings, in their country trade committees, in their statewide marketing and purchasing cooperatives. But, in vivid contrast, the passive reading of reform newspapers fortified inherited patterns of deference. Thus the democratic intensity of the People's Party declined over time, because means were not found to sustain democratic input from the mass of participating Populists. In this fundamental political sense, the movement culture of Populism was not, and could not be, as intense as the movement culture originally generated within the Alliance cooperative crusade. The people were the same, but a crucial democratic element was no longer present.

The original Alliance organizers sensed this. They labored long and hard to keep the Alliance organization intact, even after they had successfully formed the People's Party. But within the intellectual traditions of reform theory in western culture, Alliancemen found few nineteenth-century models to guide them in this organizational endeavor. Indeed, in a number of quarters that were increasingly influential in vanguard political circles in Europe, the idea of mass democratic institutions serving as the central agent of social change was being rejected at the very moment the agrarian revolt appeared in America. To many would-be revolutionaries—even as they asserted their beliefs in the name of "democracy"—the rural peasantry and the urban proletariat had both demonstrated their inability to participate meaningfully in serious restructuring of industrial societies. The answer reached by Lenin was, of course, to entrust the advent of the "new day" to a small intellectual elite, tightly organized as a revolutionary party. In such a structure the risks of institutionalizing authoritarian rule are obvious today, if they were not then. At any event, such theoretical approaches clearly had no appeal to Alliance radicals, driven as they were by visions of authentic mass democracy. The Alliance founders, then, turned for their model not to the nineteenth century, but to the eighteenth.

As Thomas Gaines, one of the original architects of the Alliance and a close associate of William Lamb and Evan Jones, explained, the Alliance needed to stand in relation to the People's Party as the Jacobin Clubs of revolutionary France had stood in

relation to the new democratic parliamentary government. The self-organized people of the Alliance would serve as "a mighty base of support" for Populist candidates when they legislated democratically and a strong admonishing force when they did not. By that means the people would retain control over their own movement and not surrender it to their own politicians. While this view incorporated a sophisticated understanding of the essential ingredients of mass democracy, after the destruction of the cooperatives the organizational means to keep the Alliance alive unfortunately did not exist. The Alliance founders spoke of the continuing "educational" value of the order as a grassroots forum for political debate and they spoke of "the community" of the Alliance, sometimes in far-ranging terms that incorporated advanced ideas on women's rights and democratic human relations generally. But a community cannot persist simply because some of its members have a strong conviction that it ought to persist. A community, even one seeing itself as a "brotherhood" and "sisterhood," needs to have something fundamental to do, an organic purpose beyond "fellowship" that reaffirms the community's need to continue its collective effort. And this, after the collapse of the cooperatives, the Alliance failed to have. As the cooperatives went down in 1890–93, the Alliance organizations across the nation gradually, often rather quickly, became smaller. The order therefore could not serve either as a "mighty base" of support or as an influential force for ethical admonition within the third party movement. Even though many, most, or all of its former members were Populists in good standing, by 1893 the internal democratic cohesion of the Alliance movement had begun to weaken—in every state in America.

The era of the People's Party, therefore, may be seen as a period of gradual decline in organized democratic energy in Gilded Age politics. To be sure, there were vibrant rallies; spectacular editorials in the journalistic flagships of the Reform Press Association; moments of heady victory; and intense, colorful, and often bitter campaigns. But though all of these things were done in the name of the people's movement, it no longer, in a real sense, *was* a people's movement: the third party

had no interior mass base as its core; it had only individual adherents who voted for it on election day.

In democratic terms, the structural weakness of the People's Party evolved from the failure of its organizers, in the founding convention of 1892, to understand that the third party, to be authentically democratic, had to be organized as a mass party with a mass membership. It was organized instead, like all large American parties before and since, as a representative party, with elite cadres of party regulars dominating the organizational machinery from precinct to national convention. The People's Party spoke, rather more tellingly than most American parties have ever done, in the name of the people. But in structural terms the People's Party was not made up of the people; it was comprised of party elites. Its ultimate failure, therefore, was conceptual—a failure on a theoretical level of democratic analysis.*

Nevertheless, despite these necessary qualifications the People's Party was, thanks to the sheer emotional and organizational intensity that brought it into being, a political institution of unique passion and vigor in American history. There were, however, always significant gradations of participation in the movement culture. For those who had learned their cooperative lessons most thoroughly, the original Alliance dream sustained itself throughout the entire life of the third party crusade. But upon all those who had participated in these experiences in less vivid ways the pull of the received culture inexorably worked its will. And in many new Alliance states where the third party was numerically small Populism became ideologically fragile as well. In the state that led the farmers to the Alliance, Texas, and in the state that led the Alliance to the People's Party, Kansas, the agrarian dream possessed continuing, though gradually diminishing, democratic intensity. It maintained for a while an interesting thrust in Georgia, Alabama, California, and South Dakota as well. Everywhere else the democratic vision had, by 1894, begun to grow noticeably weaker and, in some places, had begun

* This failure is shared, of course, by the modern major parties of America—a fact that undergirds the hierarchical corporate structure of contemporary American society and politics.

to wither with some abruptness. Thus while the People's Party was many things, even many democratic things, it was not an unsteepled chapel of mass democracy—its own functionaries saw to that, conclusively, in 1896. Beyond this, each stolen election and act of terrorism in the South and each "practical" coalition in the West served to chip away the morale and sap the energy of the movement. It took the strongest kind of parallel communities and the steadiest kind of movement leadership to keep the democratic idea alive in the presence of the sustained hierarchical cultural attacks (including vigilante attacks) to which the reform movement was subjected. After the defeat of the cooperatives, the pressure was too great for the People's Party, alone, to bear. The movement lost its animating reality and, in the end, became like its shadow and succumbed to hierarchical politics.

Long before that moment of self-destruction in 1896 the movement's organizational source, the National Farmers Alliance, having rendered its final service to farmers by creating the new party of reform in 1892, had moved into the wings of the agrarian revolt. In so doing, the Alliance transferred to the political arena the broad aims it had failed to accomplish through its cooperative crusade. The organizational boundaries of the People's Party were fixed by the previous limits of the Alliance. The greenback doctrines of the Alliance were imbibed by those who participated in the cooperative crusade, but by very few other Americans. Though several Western mining states that were not deeply affected by Alliance organizers achieved a measure of one-plank silverism, and Nebraska produced its uniquely issueless shadow movement, no American state not organized by the Alliance developed a strong Populist presence. The fate of the parent institution and its political offspring was inextricably linked.

The largest citizen institution of nineteenth-century America, the National Farmers Alliance and Industrial Union persisted through the 1890's, defending the core doctrines of greenbackism within the People's Party and keeping to the fore the dream of a "new day for the industrial millions." Its mass roots severed by the cooperative failure at the very moment its hopes were

carried forward by the People's Party, the Alliance passed from view at the end of the century. Its sole material legacy was the "Alliance warehouse" weathering in a thousand towns scattered across the American South and West. In folklore, it came to be remembered that the Alliance had been "a great movement" and that it had killed itself because it had "gone into politics." But at its zenith, it reached into forty-three states and territories and, for a moment, changed the lives and the consciousness of millions of Americans. As a mass democratic institution, the saga of the Alliance is unique in American history.

In cooperative defeat and political defeat, the farmers of the Alliance and the People's Party lost more than their movement, they lost the community they had created. They lost more than their battle on the money question, they lost their chance for a measure of autonomy. They lost more than their People's Party, they lost the hopeful, embryonic culture of generosity that their party represented. The stakes, as the Alliance founders had always known, were high, for the agrarian dream was truly a large one—a democratic society grounded in mass dignity.

13

What is to be concluded of Populism's three opponents—the shadow movement, the Democratic Party, and the Republican Party?

The sometimes formless, sometimes silverite expression which historically has been regarded as "American Populism" and which has appeared in these pages as the "shadow movement" may be judged to be trivial as a political faith. A natural outgrowth of the intellectual and programmatic aimlessness of the Northwestern Farmers Alliance, the shadow movement had historical meaning only in the context of the actual agrarian movement mounted by the National Farmers Alliance and Industrial Union. Devoid of genuine political substance, the shadow movement was patently less interesting than Populism, being little more than an imitative reprise on the superficial agitation over the "Crime of '73" that had helped to sidetrack

greenback reform a generation earlier.* The second silver drive proved no more coherent than the first. The shadow movement, as it triumphed in 1896 in Kansas, in 1894 in North Carolina, and in 1890 in Nebraska, had common characteristics: it was led by politicians, its tactics were defined by them, and the usefulness of such tactics depended upon the successful avoidance of the intellectual content embedded in the Populist platform. Some fusionist politicians, like Senator Peffer of Kansas, gave up the Populist faith reluctantly and only temporarily; others, like Allen of Nebraska, had never known it. But in embracing the silver expedient, they all identified themselves with a cause that originated outside the People's Party and was financed by mining interests whose goals were inimical to the objectives of Populism.

The symbolic spokesman of both the Northwestern Farmers Alliance and the shadow movement was Jay Burrows of Nebraska. He, having never grasped the meaning of the cooperative crusade and never having experienced its political lessons, could write in 1896 that William Jennings Bryan was "practically a Populist except in name."

Organizationally derivative, intellectually without purpose, the shadow movement never fashioned its own political premise; inevitably, its sole criterion became conventional politics itself—the desire of office-seekers to prevail at the next election. In attempting to address their own short-run electoral needs, the tacticians of fusion adopted as their own the political purposes of the silver mineowners. But having no political or cultural base independent of others, the fusionists had no hope of surviving on the goals of others. Their moment of tactical triumph, lasting a few hours at the Populist convention in 1896, was inherently ironic: in achieving the nomination of William Jennings Bryan, they not only ensured their own organizational extinction, they also provided a way for farmers to submerge themselves in the new two-party corporate politics of modern America.

The silver crusade nevertheless possessed considerable cul-

* See Chapter 1.

tural significance for what it revealed of the state of political consciousness of those millions of Americans who did not respond to the Omaha Platform but who did embrace the free coinage panacea. The silver Democratic Party of William Jennings Bryan, like the Gold Democracy of Grover Cleveland and the "sound money" Republican Party of William McKinley, was, intellectually, an anachronism. As negative reactions to the Omaha Platform, the politics of silver and the politics of gold illustrated the narrowing political range of the corporate society that was then emerging. In monetary analysis, Gold Democrats were neither better nor worse than Silver Democrats, merely their equals in hyperbole and in their misunderstanding of how monetary systems worked. Both represented the triumph of form over substance.

In statesmanship, the Bryanites, not achieving office, left no record; the Cleveland Democracy, however, repeatedly proved its inability to perceive the world around it and demonstrated rather forcefully its resulting incapacity to govern. Frozen in a philosophy of laissez faire, Cleveland was virtually immobilized by the depression of the 1890's, and was unable to respond either to the needs of the unemployed or to the imperatives of the inevitable financial crisis. The ultimate effect of his frantic gold bond issues was to transfer sizable portions of the government's reserve from the United States Treasury to the Eastern financial community. All was done in the name of "sound money."

On the other hand, the Republican Party, an increasingly narrow-gauged but powerful engine, made a determined show of running both the nation and its economy. Thanks to the energy of the American industrial system, a demanding and ruthless contrivance, but, relatively speaking, an efficient one, the Republicans were able to do just that. They liked the contrivance, even celebrated it with a self-serving and narrow insularity that blinded them to the costs it exacted in both human and natural resources, in the beauty of the land itself, and in the vigor and range of the national culture. But they did all these things with a public display of confidence and were able to escape relatively unscathed. The Republicans, it should be noted,

did not respond to the depression with any more verve than Cleveland had managed. But with its newly consolidated majority position, the Republican Party—except for the Wilsonian interlude—ruled the nation for two generations. During that period America added to its material wealth because of the absence of feudal restraints upon the imaginativeness of its people, because of the energy of both its entrepreneurs and their employees, and because of the great bounty nature had bestowed upon the American continent. The political institutions of the nation were vastly overshadowed in importance by these deeper rhythms that propelled an unbalanced and provincial democracy toward the crises that awaited it in the twentieth century.

14

When those crises came, twentieth-century America found itself still firmly bound to the nineteenth-century orthodoxies against which the Populists had rebelled—presumptions that outlined the proper limits of democratic debate, the prerogatives of corporate money in shaping political decision-making, and the meaning of progress itself. Though the first years of the new era were no longer called the "Age of Excess"—they were, in fact, called the "Progressive era"—the acceptable political boundaries for participants in both parties received their definition from the economic values that triumphed politically in the Gilded Age. When the long Republican reign came to an end in 1932, the alternatives envisioned by the Democrats of the New Deal unconsciously reflected the shrunken vistas that remained culturally permissible. Aspirations for financial reform on a scale imagined by greenbackers had expired, even among those who thought of themselves as reformers. Inevitably, such reformers had lost the possibility of understanding how the system worked. Structural reform of American banking no longer existed as an issue in America. The ultimate cultural victory being not merely to win an argument but to remove the subject from the agenda of future contention, the consolidation of values that so successfully submerged the "financial question" beyond the purview of succeeding generations was self-sustaining and largely invisible.

The complacency of the nation's intellectual elite of the Gilded Age, it turned out, ranged beyond the dull monometallism of academic economists such as J. Laurence Laughlin or the superficial satire of E. L. Godkin; it enveloped even those enlightened literary arbiters who considered themselves in the vanguard of the new realism. When a sympathetic William Dean Howells could unwittingly and patronizingly describe the farmers of the Alliance as "grim, sordid, pathetic, ferocious figures" and characterize the cooperative crusade, about which he almost certainly knew little or nothing, as "blind groping for fairer conditions," the cultural barriers to analytical clarity were manifestly settling into hardening concrete. In the new century, gifted historians such as Richard Hofstadter not only followed in the Howells tradition, their interpretations of the American experience captured the cultural high ground within the American academy. In the prevailing view, "the system," beset with human frailty as it was, "worked." While it had flaws, more often than not they materialized from the irrationality and spite of the general populace rather than from any failings on the part of the nation's commercial and intellectual elite. This thought, of course, has proved enormously consoling to the elites, and accounts for the undiminished emotional appeal of this reigning intellectual tradition.*

* It is interesting to observe that one group of Americans, the nation's leading novelists, have consistently resisted both the language of genteel apologia and the language of celebration that combine to inform the mainstream academic view of the American past. The contrast between the sanguine, culturally confined literature of American history and the brooding chronicle of endurance and tragedy that characterizes the nation's best fiction is an interesting contemporary phenomenon. The American historical tradition of conveying the national experience as a purposeful and generally progressive saga, almost divinely exonerated, as it were, from the vicissitudes elsewhere afflicting the human condition, may perhaps account for the remarkably different levels of impact American historians and American novelists have had on non-Americans. While a number of American novelists, from Melville to Faulkner, are admired throughout the world, no American historian has remotely achieved similar standing.

It may be argued that the historical approaches that are traditional within the American academic mainstream have failed to uncover mass striving and mass defeat because, on the deepest psychological level, more specific conceptual and analytical tools were not thought to be needed to describe social realities in this "democratic" nation. It was simpler to dismiss moments of unseemly discord as, in Howells's phrase, "blind groping for fairer conditions," or, in Hofstadter's, as the irrationalities of people who saw themselves as "innocent pastoral victims of conspiracies hatched in the distance." Whether the general failure to focus upon the depth and permanence of hierarchical structures of power and privilege in America is a cause or a result of inherited modes of cultural narrowness is, perhaps, debatable, but the complacent cast of the historical genre scarcely is. Though there are noteworthy exceptions, the standard American history texts used in high schools and colleges throughout the nation are impressive examples of scholarly deference to the received culture. As such they serve to reveal how thoroughly the values of the corporate state suffuse contemporary intellectual life in the United States. The nation's most renowned novelists, of course, have taken pains to position themselves securely outside this narrow and uncreative orthodoxy.

Grounded in such a view of the national past, the political sensibility that materialized within the cramped American party system of the twentieth century found itself too rigid and too dangerously condescending to support truly expansive vistas of democratic possibility, such as those afforded by the continuing aspirations of the millions of "the people" who, because of manners, occupation, or skin color, could not gain access to the benefits of the progressive society. Within the confines of this narrowing social outlook, Americans seem to have lost the capacity to think seriously about the structure of their own society: Words like "inevitability," "efficiency," and "modernization" are passively accepted as the operative explanations for the increasingly hierarchical nature of contemporary life.

Three central issues of Populism illustrate the mass resignation characteristic of modern society and reveal the extent Americans have lost contact with the democratic premises of earlier eras. Those issues concern, first, land ownership in America; second, the hierarchical nature of the nation's basic financial structure; and third, the consuming threat that corporate centralization poses to the democratic heritage itself. In much the same way that centralization of land was characteristic of feudalism, it has become increasingly characteristic of modern America. The centralization of land ownership in American agriculture has for years been fashionably attributed to the competitive "efficiency" of "economies of scale" by large-unit corporate farming interests—as compared to the presumed limitations in the operations of family farms. Awaiting agricultural analysis, em-

barrassingly enough, is a considerable amount of evidence suggesting that the real economies of scale are not technical, but artificial, produced by the monopolistic practices of suppliers and purchasers and further undergirded by federal subsidy and tax policies. But while the concept of "economies of scale" remains debatable, the more germane historical reality is that centralization of American land was well advanced even before corporate agriculture could prove or disprove its "efficiency." It was simply a matter of capital and the power of those having capital to prevent remedial democratic legislation. The failure to provide short-run credit for seventy years would seem to be the operative ingredient in these dynamics which has been rather overlooked.

The one agricultural adventure of the New Deal that most nearly approached Charles Macune's objective of benefiting "the whole class" was the resettlement program of the Farm Security Administration, designed to provide land loans at low interest to enable black and white tenants to become owners of family farms. The program was initiated on a small scale in isolated pockets in the South and West in the 1930's. Though the program was successful, land acquisition was halted in 1943. In that year the program, long under attack from large-unit farming interests within the Department of Agriculture, from large-unit farming interests in the Farm Bureau Federation, and from congressmen responsive to the lobbying power of large-unit farming interests, was killed. The process of land centralization across America has since accelerated, especially affecting black landowners in the South.

In the absence of significant literature on the subject, land centralization is a process that remains obscure to most Americans, but one they may feel no right to inquire into—given the fact that land centralization is sanctioned by the culture itself. Indeed, the remarkable cultural hegemony prevailing militates against serious inquiry into the underlying economic health of American society, so this information is, first, not available, and, second, its non-availability is not a subject of public debate. Large-scale property ownership in America is a legal secret secluded in "trusts," "street names," and "nominees" beyond the

reach of any democratic institution in the society.* Though Populists had the self-possession to struggle against land syndicates, Americans no longer contest the matter.

Similarly, the nation's hierarchical banking system dominates the lives of modern Americans in subtle and pervasive ways. For millions of Americans one of the central purposes of long years of striving is the desire to own a home of their own. The pattern of interest rates, together with federal housing programs tailored to the self-interest of the banking community, have effectively placed such home ownership beyond the reach of the majority of working class Americans. As informed political scientists know, and have reported, of all Washington lobbies, the most powerful is the banking lobby. Even the "Pentagon lobby" must shape its needs to conform to the imperatives of the commercial bankers. Yet the idea of a democratic monetary system—the operative dynamic of American Populism—is simply not something that Americans seem any longer to aspire to. It is not "practical" to have such large democratic goals. Thus does modern sophistication serve as a defense for modern resignation.

Inexorably, the consolidation of economic power in corporate America has shaped an entirely new political landscape, one in which the agenda of possible democratic actions has shrunk significantly. The Populist fear that corporate concentration would undermine the popular autonomy necessary to the preservation of authentic democratic dialogue has been realized. Modern politics takes place wholly within the narrowed boundaries of the corporate state. In most circles, it is now considered bad manners to venture outside these boundaries. While most Americans do not venture, they also do not celebrate the limits. They cannot, however, find a culturally sanctioned way to express their anxiety politically. A heartfelt but unfocused

* Informed research in this area has not yet begun—and cannot be—until the disclosure laws are reformed. See U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Government Operations, *Disclosure of Corporate Ownership*, Staff Report of the Subcommittee on Budgeting, Management and Expenditure, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess., May 4, 1974 (Washington, D.C., 1974); U.S. Congress, House Committee on Banking and Currency, *Commercial Banks and Their Trust Activities, Emerging Influence on the American Economy*, Staff Report for the Subcommittee on Domestic Finance, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., July 8, 1968 (Washington, D.C., 1968).

discontent about "politics" has therefore become a centerpiece of the popular subculture across the nation.

Twentieth-century people, reduced to the sobering knowledge that theirs, politically, is the least creative century of the last three, take refuge in private modes of escape and expression, found largely through the pursuit and consumption of products. The corresponding decline in the vitality of public life verifies the constraints of modern political thought. "The people," though full of anxiety, do not know what to do politically to make their society less authoritarian. Language is the instrument of thought, and it has proven difficult for people to think about democracy while employing hierarchical terminology. On the available evidence, twentieth-century people around the globe are paying a high price for their submission to the hierarchical languages of political analysis that have grown out of the visions of Adam Smith and Karl Marx. The problem that will doubtless interest future historians is not so much the presence, in the twentieth century, of mass political alienation, but the passivity with which the citizenry accepted that condition. It may well become known as the century of sophisticated deference.

As objects of study, the Populists themselves were to fall victim to the inability of twentieth-century humanists of various ideological persuasions to conceive that authentic political substance might originate outside such acceptable intellectual sources as the progressive, capitalist, middle classes or the European socialist heritage. Since both traditions continued to employ encrusted political terms rooted in outdated nineteenth-century languages of prophecy, the antiquarian nature of modern politics became difficult to overstate. From all quarters, Populists were denied authentic historical association with their own movement. Accordingly, their chief legacy—a capacity to have significant democratic aspirations, a simple matter of scale of thought—faded from American political culture. The reform tradition that materialized in the twentieth century was intimidated and, therefore, unimaginative. Harry Tracy and other Populist theoreticians had called for 300 per cent inflation through a return to the per capita circulation of 1865, on the sole and valid ground that the sub-treasury system was intelligent and would

provide an immediate remedy for a central and long-neglected flaw at the heart of American capitalism. The capacity to think politically on such a scale was Populistic; it passed from the mainstream American reform tradition with the defeat of Populism.

By this process, the relatively expansive pre-industrial sensibilities that had animated Thomas Jefferson, George Mason, and the original Anti-Federalists gradually lost that strand of democratic continuity and legitimacy which, in fact, connected their time and their possibility to our own through the actions of Americans who lived in the interim: the Populist connecting link was lost to the heritage.* The egalitarian current that was part of the nation's wellspring became not a constantly active source of ideas, but a curious backwater, eddying somewhere outside both the conveyed historical heritage and the mainstream of modern political thought that necessarily builds upon that heritage.

* Unlike Jefferson, of course, Populists were not dedicated to small government because they believed such an entity could not cope with the power of concentrated capital. Rather, Populists sought democratic government, as Jefferson himself had.

Populist theory poses the central twentieth-century political question: can large government be democratic? The history of twentieth-century industrial societies indicates not—at least not within the prevailing conceptual limitations of traditional capitalism and traditional socialism. Unfortunately, the idea that workable small-unit democracy is possible within large-unit systems of economic production is alien to the shared presumptions of "progress" that unite capitalists and communists in a religious brotherhood. So much so that the very thought tends to give people a headache. Intellectual short-circuits crackle everywhere. The topic, therefore, is not one the young are encouraged to speculate about; such a possibility challenges our settled resignation and puts people ill at ease. It is simpler to sustain one's morale by teaching the young not to aspire too grandly for too much democracy.

The conclusion is transparent: the intellectual range of modern industrial societies is quite narrow. One observes that this conclusion is avoided by participants in the mainstream of capitalist and socialist societies because, to do otherwise, in sophisticated circles, is not career oriented and, in unsophisticated circles, is unpatriotic. On the historical evidence, it seems possible to conclude that Mark Hanna and Henry Vincent (for different reasons, of course, since Hanna was not a democrat) would have understood these dynamics without too much psychic strain. On the other hand, it seems probable that William Jennings Bryan, in his provincial innocence, would not have understood. Bryan may be seen, therefore, to be one of the participants in Gilded Age public life who most nearly resembles "modern" political figures.

The result is self-insulation: the popular aspirations of the people of the "third world" in the twentieth century have easily become as threatening to modern Americans as the revolt of their own farmers was to goldbugs eighty years ago. Though American foreign policy and American weapons have defended anachronistic feudal and military hierarchies in South America, Africa, and Asia, such actions being justified at home as necessary to the defense of "democracy," neither the policy nor the justification has proved notably persuasive to the non-Americans who are the mass victims of such hierarchies. The resulting unpopularity of America puzzles Americans. The policies themselves, however, are not debatable within the limits of public dialogue sanctioned in modern America. Under such constraints, the ultimate political price that Americans may be forced to pay for their narrowed cultural range in the twentieth century has emerged as a question of sobering dimension.

15

However they were subsequently characterized, Populists in their own time derived their most incisive power from the simple fact that they declined to participate adequately in a central element of the emerging American faith. In an age of progress and forward motion, they had come to suspect that Horatio Alger was not real. In due course, they came to possess a cultural flaw that armed them with considerable critical power. Heretics in a land of true believers and recent converts, they saw the coming society and they did not like it. It was perhaps inevitable that since they lost their struggle to deflect that society from its determined path of corporate celebration, they were among the last of the heretics. Once defeated, they lost what cultural autonomy they had amassed and surrendered their progeny to the training camps of the conquering army. All Americans, including the children of Populists, were exposed to the new dogmas of progress confidently conveyed in the public school system and in the nation's history texts. As the twentieth-century recipients of this instruction, we have found it difficult to listen with sustained attention to the words of those who dissented at the moment a transcendent cultural norm was being fashioned.

In their own era, the agrarian spokesmen who talked of the "coming revolution" turned out to be much too hopeful. Though in the months of Populist collapse and for successive decades thereafter prosperity eluded those the reformers called the "producing classes," the growing industrial society preserved the narrowed boundaries of political dialogue substantially intact, as roughly one-third of America's urban workers moved slowly into the middle class. The mystique of progress itself helped to hold in muted resignation the millions who continued in poverty and other millions who, for reasons of the exclusiveness and white supremacy of the progressive society, were not permitted to live their lives in dignity.

As the first beneficiary of the cultural consolidation of the 1890's, the new Republican orthodoxy, grounded in the revolutionary (and decidedly anti-Jeffersonian) political methods of Mark Hanna, provided the mores for the twentieth century without ever having to endure a serious debate about the possibility of structural change in the American forms of finance capitalism. Political conservatives nevertheless endured intermittent periods of extreme nervousness—such as was produced in 1933 by the nation's sudden and forced departure from the gold standard. Given the presumed centrality of a metallic currency, it took a while for cultural traditionalists, including bankers, to realize that the influence of the banking community had not suffered organic disturbances—J. Laurence Laughlin to the contrary notwithstanding. Though the pattern of interest rates during and after World War II continued to transfer measurable portions of the national income from both business and labor to bankers—in the process burdening the structure of prices with an added increment of cost as well as changing the very structure of industrial capitalism—disputes over the distribution of income within the whole society did not precipitate serious social contentions as long as America maintained a favorable international trade and investment balance. It remained clear, however, that unresolved questions about the inherited financial system might well make a sudden and unexpected reappearance if, at any time in the second half of the twentieth century, shifts in world trade and the cost of imported raw materials placed severe forms of competitive pressure on

the American economy and on the international monetary system. At such a moment the cultural consolidation fashioned in the Gilded Age would undergo its first sustained re-evaluation, as the "financial question" once again intruded into the nation's politics and the issues of Populism again penetrated the American consciousness. That time, while pending, has not yet come.

For their part, Gilded Age traditionalists did not view the conclusive triumph of the corporate ethos as a foregone conclusion. Themselves insecure in an era of real and apparent change, they were unable to distinguish between authentic signs of economic dislocation and the political threat represented by those who called attention to those signs. On this rather primitive level the politics of the era resolved itself, and the progressive society was born. As an outgrowth of its insularity and complacency, industrializing America wanted uncritical voices of celebration. The agrarian radicals instead delivered the warning that all was not well with the democracy. They were not thanked.

Today, the values and the sheer power of corporate America pinch in the horizons of millions of obsequious corporate employees, tower over every American legislature, state and national, determine the modes and style of mass communications and mass education, fashion American foreign policy around the globe, and shape the rules of the American political process itself. Self-evidently, corporate values define modern American culture.

It was the corporate state that the People's Party attempted to bring under democratic control.

Afterword

What became of the radicals—the earnest advocates who spawned the agrarian revolt? The subsequent careers of the people who have filled these pages merely testified to the diversity of American life. Some Populists adjusted to the collapse of their movement with what others in the ranks regarded as entirely too much poise and equanimity. Others looked desperately for a new political home, and a few, finding none and unable to bear the consequences, committed suicide.

In Kansas, Senator William Peffer recoiled from his brief sojourn into fusion in 1896, publicly described it as a decisive error, and was defeated for re-election. He dallied briefly as a third party Prohibition candidate and thereafter returned to the Republican Party. The fusion-minded chairman of the Kansas party, John Breidenthal, whose political career extended back through the Union Labor Party to the original Greenback Party, flirted with socialism and then grudgingly became a Republican. One of his mid-road opponents in Kansas, G. C. Clemens, became the Social Democratic candidate for Governor in 1900. At Clemens's opening campaign meeting, he was introduced by another convert to socialism, Lorenzo Lewelling, the ex-Governor and former ardent fusionist. Jerry Simpson went to New Mexico; where he became a land agent for the Santa Fe Railroad.

Frank Doster, the socialist judge, became the Populist Chief Justice of the Kansas Supreme Court after being attacked as a

"shabby, wild-eyed, rattle-brained fanatic" by William Allen White, the Emporia editor. Doster's evenhanded decisions and eloquent written opinions won the grudging respect and, eventually, the freely acknowledged admiration of the Kansas bar. In the new century, the courtly jurist had the satisfaction of watching the slow evolution of William Allen White into a Progressive, gracefully accepted White's public apologies, and remained an unreconstructed critic of many features of American capitalism throughout his long life. Doster worked actively for woman's suffrage in Kansas, considered the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt a hopeful sign, and died in 1933 while drafting agrarian reform legislation to help the increasing number of tenant farmers in Kansas.

Julius Wayland developed the *Appeal to Reason* into the nation's foremost socialist newspaper. One famed special edition of a million copies required the labor of most of the citizens of Girard, Kansas, to mail. Though a successful businessman as well as an ardent socialist, Wayland ultimately lapsed into despondency and committed suicide.

Marion Butler became a greenbacker and William Allen became a mid-roader—at least fleetingly. After Allen's retirement from the Senate, he ultimately decided the policy of fusion had been a mistake. He attended one of the final, desperate "reorganizing" meetings of mid-road Populists in Denver in 1903 and then focused on his law practice. Marion Butler declared his conversion to a fiat currency in one of his last public addresses in the United States Senate. At the time, 1901, Butler knew he was a lame-duck Senator because Populist-Republican fusion in North Carolina had fallen victim to Democratic terrorism in 1898. In a massive campaign of white supremacy, punctuated by gunfire and arson, "the party of the fathers" had been swept back into office that year. During Populism's last stand in North Carolina in 1900, two of Butler's old opponents, Harry Tracy and "Stump" Ashby, came into the state in a vain effort to help him combat the organized politics of white supremacy. Butler was at that time one of the last surviving Populist officeholders in the South, and his conversion to the greenback cause apparently was the fruit of his belated association with Tracy, the third party's foremost monetary theorist. Butler's break with the Democratic Party, which followed hard on the heels of the lessons he learned in the fusion campaign of 1896, was permanent. He gradually became more liberal on the race issue. Butler passed into the Southern Republican Party in the new century and never thereafter came to terms with the party of the fathers.

Tom Watson did. The frustration of his Populist years dogged Watson through a hopeless 1908 campaign in which he served as the last presidential candidate of the diehard Populist remnant. After more than a decade of stolen elections and what he regarded as fusionist betrayals, Watson became deeply embittered. He eventually blamed blacks, Catholics, and Jews for his own, and the nation's, political difficulties. He became a violently outspoken white supremacist, anti-Semite, and defender of the Republic against the papal menace. In the twilight of a life steeped in personal tragedy and blunted dreams, and consumed at its end by the political malice he had developed as a battered campaigner, Watson in 1920 won a surprising victory and became United States Senator from Georgia. He died in office in 1922. One other prominent Southern Populist, James "Cyclone" Davis, had an almost identical political career. Alienated from most of his fellow Populists in Texas because he was not sufficiently alienated from the Democratic Party, Davis, a covert Texas fusionist in 1896 and an overt one in 1898, made the full return to "the party of the fathers" as the new century opened. He became a prohibitionist and white supremacist, worked for the Ku Klux Klan, and won election for one term as a Congressman in 1916, taking the old seat that had been denied him by "Harrison County methods" in 1894. As late as 1939, the white-bearded Davis could be heard on the streetcorners of Dallas, making flamboyant speeches on the need to control Wall Street and the necessity of white supremacy.

Reuben Kolb in Alabama and James Weaver in Iowa both remained Bryan Democrats after 1896. Weaver became the Mayor of Colfax, Iowa, and died in that office in 1912. Minnesota's Ignatius Donnelly enjoyed a minor career as a literary figure. Mann Page, the Virginia Populist, became one of the last

presidents of the National Farmers Alliance and gradually and reluctantly returned to the Democratic Party of Virginia. The editorial spokesman of Virginia Populism, Charles Pierson, the Oxfordian who edited the Virginia *Sun*, became a Debsian socialist.

Many of the most renowned radical organizers of the Alliance, relatively young men in the early cooperative days in the 1880's, lived well into the twentieth century. South Dakota's Henry Loucks was still writing antimonopoly pamphlets that extolled the virtues of farmer cooperatives as late as 1919. J. F. Willits, leader of the Kansas Alliance, became a socialist. W. Scott Morgan of Arkansas penned a brooding attack on the racial demagoguery of the Southern Democracy and saw it published as a novel in 1904. (It must be said that Morgan's political instincts surpassed his literary gifts.) Joseph Manning, Alabama's relentlessly energetic Populist, fought fusion to the bitter end in 1896 and then joined the rapidly shrinking Alabama Republican Party in the midst of the politics of disfranchisement. He eventually moved to New York, where on one occasion he was honored by a black organization with whom he shared progressive political sympathies. Like Morgan of Arkansas, Manning tried to energize other white Americans to do something about the party of white supremacy in the South. If Manning's politics coalesced easily with Morgan's, his book, *The Fadeout of Populism*, published in 1922, unfortunately also confirmed him as Morgan's equal as a writer.

Henry Vincent spent his life as a printer, editor, and reformer. In the 1920's he received the support of a number of American intellectuals and progressives, including John Dewey and Arthur Garfield Hays, in a new venture called *The Liberal Magazine*. His brother Leopold, whose lyrics found their way into the *Alliance Songster* during the hopeful days of the Alliance national organizing campaign in 1890–91, married a young woman of progressive views and settled in Oklahoma. "Stump" Ashby, the "famous agitator and humorist" and perhaps Populism's most eligible bachelor, also migrated to Oklahoma. He married a daughter of the Comanche Indian nation, and sired a large family. Along with his old radical colleague, S. O. Daws, the original "traveling lecturer" of the Alliance, Ashby helped organize the Oklahoma Farmers Union in the new century. A rangy patriarch of the left whose oratorical powers and humor brought him friends wherever he went, Ashby died in Octavia, Oklahoma, in 1923.

William Lamb became one of the most prosperous of all the old radical organizers. Much of the land he acquired for his Montague County farm became the site of the town of Bowie. Though the early Montague cooperative gin and mill that he and thirteen other Alliancemen helped underwrite in 1886 collapsed because of lack of access to credit, eventually Lamb was able to build a similar enterprise out of the proceeds of the sale of town lots. "Lamb and Hulme, millers and ginners," established a modified "sub-treasury" warehouse of their own by permitting farmers to store their cotton without charge while awaiting higher prices. The firm did one of the largest businesses in the North Texas farming country until it was destroyed by fire in the middle 1890's. In 1906, Lamb's hybrid fruits won prizes at the Fort Worth Exposition—though the aging boycotter did not quite fulfill the role of a gentleman farmer. Among other things, he remained politically radical. Many small American towns before World War II could claim one old iconoclast whose political views had been shaped by bygone struggles. In Topeka, Kansas, his name was Frank Doster; in Bowie, Texas, his name was William Lamb.

2

But if the post-Populist careers of Henry Vincent, "Stump" Ashby, Joseph Manning, and Henry Loucks, among many others, testify to the endurance of the Populist vision, and if the twentieth-century careers of Tom Watson and "Cyclone" Davis illustrate the vulnerability of that vision, the post-Populist career of one other agrarian spokesman points to something else about the American experience of even broader implication—the extent to which the American ideas of progress and democracy have been, and remain today, deeply disfigured by the enduring stain of white supremacy.

The most famous black orator in all of Populism was the third party's state executive committeeman from Texas, John Rayner. A schoolteacher in East Texas, Rayner organized a corps of assistants to work for Populism in black districts of the state. As signs of progress appeared and Rayner's reputation grew among third party men, he became a leader of the Texas People's Party and ranked as an orator only behind two nationally known third party men, James Davis and H. S. P. Ashby.

With the collapse of the third party in 1896, and the advent of black disfranchisement after the turn of the century, Rayner faced long years of humiliation as a well-known public man whose personal politics had become untenable in the changed world of the new century. An organizer who had braved sniper fire as well as physical assaults in the cause of Populism, Rayner relinquished one by one the goals of the program of interracial political action he had carried in the 1890's. By 1904, after repeated rebuffs, he had been reduced to one goal, the cause of private Negro education, which could only be supported by wealthy white people in Texas. Gradually, desperately, Rayner learned the language that would open this channel of communication. It was a language of submission that at times neared, if it did not breach, the boundaries of personal abasement. With these credentials, he raised funds for the "Farmers Improvement Society" and its agricultural school to keep Negroes down on the farm. By 1910 Rayner could draw what satisfaction was possible from the knowledge that he represented "the right kind of Negro thought" in the opinion of those who shared in power in Texas.

He returned to the Republican Party, and his old-time fire occasionally reappeared in angry letters about the racism of the "Lily Whites." In 1912, the ground for a free-thinking black to stand upon in the South had narrowed to the vanishing point, and Rayner accepted private humiliation rather than endure the psychic cost of further ritual servility. He went to work for John Kirby, a famous Texas lumber king, and spent the remaining years of his life as a labor agent recruiting Mexican peasants and transporting them to East Texas to work in Kirby's lumber mills. Rayner, a man who had spent his youth learning

the art of spoken and written persuasion, employing both in political radicalism, and who in his middle years had acquired the new art of spoken and written dissimulation, became in his old age an instrument of exploitation of those having even narrower options than himself. According to his descendants, he died "very bitter." Rayner's private papers, which extend over the period 1904 to 1916, provide a harsh insight into the years following slavery in which an aggressive white supremacy triumphed politically in the United States and gave rise to the settled caste system of the first half of the twentieth century. Before his death in 1918, Rayner pronounced a one-sentence judgment on the political system that had defeated him throughout his life. "The South," he said, "loves the Democratic Party more than it does God." However, it was not just the Democratic Party that defeated him, it was the culture itself.

3

Irony is the handmaiden of American radicalism, and the sharpest ironies were reserved for Charles W. Macune. As the *Southern Mercury* observed at the time, Macune, having no heart for a radical third party, simply withdrew from the ranks of the reformers in 1892. He never returned. He lived in the East for a while and eventually went back to Waco, the scene of his first great triumph in 1887 and his tactically decisive defeat at the hands of William Lamb in 1891. He lived out his life in Texas as a Methodist pastor, aided by his son in his final endeavor—ministering to the agrarian poor. In 1920, Macune deposited his reminiscences of the Alliance years in the University of Texas library in Austin. The fifty-nine page manuscript, as enigmatic as Macune's own career, raised more questions than it answered. He understood the nation's economy better than most Gilded Age economists, and he understood the limits of the cooperative movement better than other Alliance leaders. But he never understood the radical political world of which he was a part, or how he lost influence in the organization he had done so much to build. Yet, more broadly than anyone else, he lived the entire range of the massive agrarian attempt at self-help and

experienced in a most personal way the traumatic implications of the political movement that grew out of that effort.

In his own time, Macune's sub-treasury system was attacked relentlessly, generally without intelligence, and almost always without grace. His patient explanations were rarely printed and almost never given a fair hearing. Among historians, Macune's political traditionalism, his economic radicalism, and his recurrent opportunism have combined to leave him with few admirers. His cooperative methods have won a too-easy condemnation from those who have not confronted the realities of the financial system that both energized and defeated the cooperative movement in America.

By 1889, those who understood the options best—and Macune certainly more clearly than anyone else—knew that the Alliance dream of a national federation of regional cooperatives was untenable, because of the power and hostility of the American financial community. The sub-treasury promised to save the situation, and it did so as long as it remained merely the source of economic possibility rather than the inspiration for a radical third party. The operative life of the National Alliance, on its own terms, extended over a period of less than five years, from the announcement of the cooperative goal in the spring of 1887, through the shift to reliance upon a government-supported sub-treasury system in 1890, to the cooperative failures across the nation in 1890–92, and to its final service to farmers—as a tactical aid in the creation of the People's Party. This core economic experience of the National Alliance was Macune's experience more than any other man's.

Macune's own political weakness was the general weakness of the Southern Democracy and reflected the environment in which both he and his conservative rivals matured. He had some narrow horizons. Though his ambition for himself and the Alliance encouraged him to lofty nationwide organizing strategies, he never understood the political drives of urban workers, Western farmers, or black Americans. The men he gathered around him in Washington—Terrell, Tracy, Sledge, Tillman, and Turner—were all Southerners, three from Texas, one from Tennessee, and one from Georgia. Obsessed by the challenge of freeing the Southern farmer from the crop lien, Macune

performed with unusual creativity. But he did not habitually think in political terms beyond those of his own immediate environment, nor, as his actions in 1892 revealed, did he have the political courage of his economic convictions. His sectional loyalty to the party of white supremacy stained the meaning of much of his work.

Yet, having said this, it is proper to add that Macune's sub-treasury system for the "whole class" was one of the boldest and most imaginative economic ideas suggested in nineteenth-century America. More significantly for the long run, the sub-treasury plan rested upon a broad theoretical foundation regarding the use of the nation's resources for the benefit of the entire society. Macune's plan was not a completely flawless solution to the rigidity of a metallic currency, but it not only was workable with simple modifications, it was clearly superior to the rigid doctrines of either goldbugs or silverites.

In the words of a modern monetary specialist, the sub-treasury plan was "a very subtle mechanism" which "simultaneously would have contended with the problems of financing cooperatives, the seasonal volatility of basic commodity prices, the scarcity of banking offices in rural areas, the lack of a 'lender of last resort' for agriculture, inefficient storage and cross-shipping, the downward stickiness of prices paid by farmers *vis-à-vis* prices received for crops, and the effects of the secular deflation on farmers' debt burdens, all of which, in a far less comprehensive fashion, were the objects of legislation in the next five decades. . . . It would have achieved what its supporters claimed—real income redistribution in favor of 'the producing classes.' "*

Indeed, the substance of the plan, beyond its conceptual basis, was its practical response to the financial realities of an industrializing state and the new power relationships between bankers and non-bankers that those realities enshrined. On this highly relevant topic, Macune was less rigid, or less culturally confined, than almost all Gilded Age politicians and an overwhelming majority of the nation's academic economists.

Whether in behalf of working Americans seeking a home of

* See "An Economic Appraisal of the Sub-Treasury Plan," by William P. Yohe, in Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, pp. 571–81.

their own, or in the context of the health and flexibility of the national economy itself, the country has never found a way to confront the enormous implications of financial relationships structurally geared to the self-interest of private, commercial bankers. It is only just to concede to Charles Macune the significance of his aims, while detailing his failings. He was the boldest single theorist of the agrarian revolt. He was also, in economic terms, one of the most creative public men of Gilded Age America. But he was also a self-created victim of an awesome political irony: while he was tactically opposed to the political activists among the Alliance founders led by Lamb, Daws, Jones, and Ashby, he shared their theoretical interpretation of the ills of the American version of capitalism. Indeed, Macune's report on the monetary system at St. Louis in 1889 specifically and repeatedly denounced the power that bankers exercised as a "class." Macune's tactical difficulty was that, in the deepest psychological dimension of his personal autonomy, he could not bear where his economic analysis carried him in political and social terms. Macune would fit well, it may be seen, into the culturally confined politics of the twentieth century.

Yet in spite of everything that befell him, including that which he brought on himself, Charles Macune was representative of an important part of the spirit of the agrarian revolt. He doubtless agreed with the prophetic warning delivered by S. O. Daws, the father of the Alliance movement and the earliest spokesman for the democratic vision that was to flower into Populism. On the eve of the first great lecturing campaign to organize the South in 1887, Daws wrote: "If the Alliance is destroyed, it will be some time before the people have confidence in themselves, and one another, to revive it, or organize anything new." This Populistic prophesy, correct as it has proven to be, is part of the legacy of the agrarian democrats to their descendants in the twentieth century.

A Critical Essay on Authorities

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