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# *The Populist Vision:* A Roundtable Discussion

*edited by Worth Robert Miller*

**T**here is a rich and diverse literature on Populism that has made the third-party movement of the 1890s one of the more contentious subjects of scholarly debate over the past century. Were Populists backward-looking hicks trying to turn the clock back to some mythical preindustrial utopia? Were they a truly radical force seeking to fundamentally restructure American society? Or, were Populists forward-looking liberal reformers embracing the twentieth century before its time?<sup>1</sup> The most recent entry into this debate is Charles Postel's new national study, *The Populist Vision*. As the winner of both the 2008 Bancroft and 2008 Frederick Jackson Turner Prizes it has been especially welcomed by scholars and the public alike.

*The Populist Vision* presents Populists as overtly modern and progressive. According to one reviewer, this book "represents the culmination of the rehabilitation of the Populists of the 1890s."<sup>2</sup> Postel argues that Populists strongly believed in the power of science and technology to improve their world and adapted the model of contemporary business to their own situation. Consequently, they drew laborers and urban middle-class reformers into their ranks as co-victims of predatory corporate greed. In *The Populist Vision*, Populists come off as ultimately logical and sympathetic reformers, well ahead of their time. Certainly, their program for reform met with much more success during the early twentieth century than before the demise of their party in the late 1890s.

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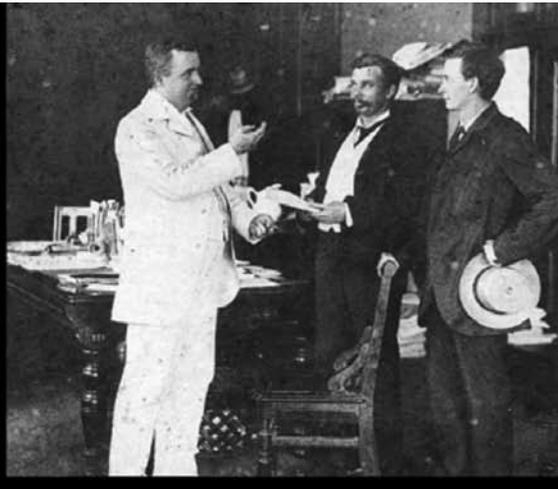
Worth Robert Miller is professor of history at Missouri State University in Springfield. He received his BA in government from the University of Texas at Austin in 1971, his MA in history from Trinity University in 1977, and his PhD in history from the University of Oklahoma in 1984. Professor Miller served as coordinator and chair of the program committee for the Thirteenth (1991), Seventeenth (1995), and Thirtieth (2008) Mid-America Conferences on History. This article is the product of a session he organized for the 2008 conference.

1. The most extensive bibliography of Populism and related topics contains twenty-one topical and thirty-three state chapters. Kansas has by far the largest state section. See <http://history.missouristate.edu/wrmiller/Populism/Texts/populism.htm>. Also useful for its discussion of Populist historiography is the "Agricultural History Roundtable on Populism: Robert C. McMath, Jr., Peter H. Argersinger, Connie L. Lester, Michael F. Magliari, and Walter Nugent," *Agricultural History* 82 (Winter 2008): 1–35.

2. Ronald P. Formisano, review of *The Populist Vision*, by Charles Postel, *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 92 (Summer 2008): 263; Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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THE RESULT  
THE INDEPENDENT THINKER  
VOTES AN INDEPENDENT TICKET.  
POLLING BOOTH VOTE HERE



The  
POPULIST  
VISION



Charles Postel

*The Populist Vision* presents Populists as overtly modern and progressive . . . . They come off as ultimately logical and sympathetic reformers, well ahead of their time.

As *The Populist Vision* takes its place among the leading national studies of the third-party movement that swept the South and West a little more than a century ago, it may be useful to put Professor Postel's new study into the context of its predecessors. The earliest major national study of Populism was John D. Hicks's *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (1933). Although considered by most to be a national study, Hicks emphasized the western sections of the nation and portrayed Populism as the interest group politics of oppressed farmers. C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (1951), which was one of six volumes of the Louisiana State University's History of the South series, filled in the details for Dixie Populism in an even more sympathetic assessment of the movement. Both were products of the hard times America experienced during the earlier part of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Americans developed somewhat different concerns when the prosperity of the 1950s emerged. The nature of the Populist revolt became most controversial with the emergence of the Cold War. Anticommunist extremists, such as Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, appeared to represent an intolerant rural constituency. Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (1955) set the tone for the newer, negative view of Populism. He regarded Populists as backward-looking, irrational, and given to scapegoatism. They represented the "agrarian myth" that spoke to the superiority of farming in what he considered to be the outdated Jeffersonian tradition.<sup>4</sup> More of an interpretative analysis than a traditional history, Hofstadter's study spurred a number of defenders and critics. Some of the most esteemed senior scholars of Populism today built their early careers upon challenging Hofstadter's interpretation. Norman Pollack in an equally interpretative volume, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought* (1962), found Populists to be rational, forward-looking, and even proto-socialist. In Kansas, Walter Nugent countered Hofstadter's charges that Populists were nativistic bigots with *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas, Populism and Nativism* (1963). Gene Clanton produced a favorable account of Kansas Populists as rational and progressive, and Peter Argersinger did the same with his bio-history of William Alfred Pepper, the leader of Kansas Populism.<sup>5</sup>

In 1976 Lawrence Goodwyn issued the second major full-length history of the Populist movement with *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*. Goodwyn argued that Populism grew out of a mass-based "movement culture," which emerged from the unsuccessful experiments in cooperative buying and selling of the Texas-based Southern Farmers' Alliance. This failure drove Alliancemen to political action in order to obtain government-

3. John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961); C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913*, A History of the South 5 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951).

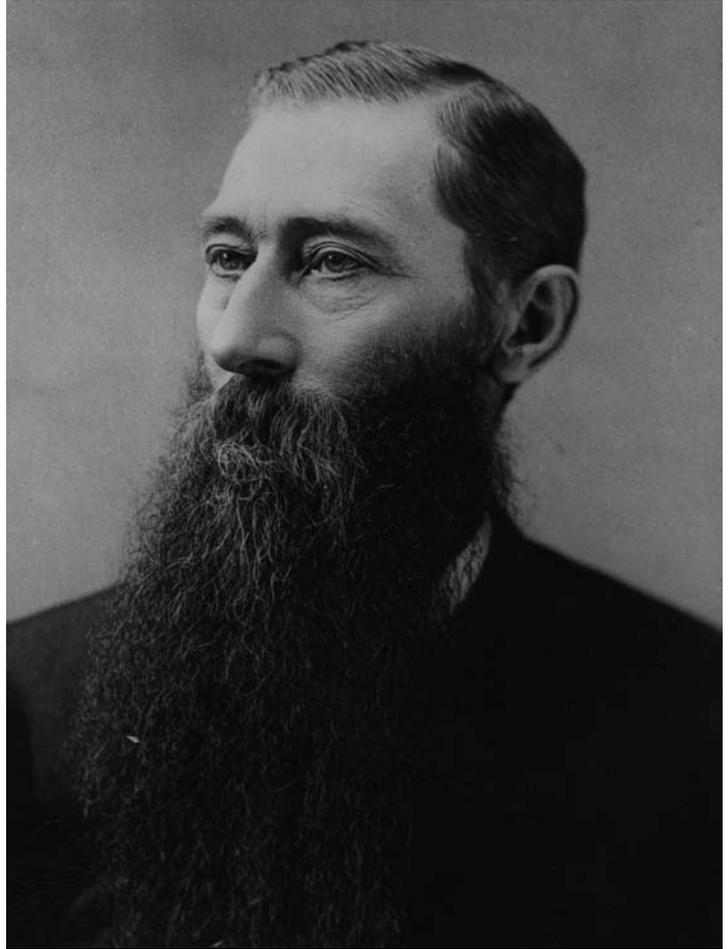
4. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).

5. Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas, Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); O. Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1969); Peter H. Argersinger, *Populism and Politics: William Alfred Pepper and the People's Party* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1974). Clanton has recently produced a revised edition of his earlier volume: *A Common Humanity: Kansas Populism and the Battle for Justice and Equality, 1854–1903* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 2004).

sponsored cooperatives with the Alliance's subtreasury plan.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Goodwyn moved the debate to the business side of the Populist Party's forerunner, the Alliance. But, Goodwyn subsequently read western Populists out of the party for their lack of commitment to the subtreasury plan. This left scholars of plains and mountain Populism, where support for the plan was lukewarm, challenging his entire argument.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1990s two book-length studies of national Populism emerged, Gene Clanton's *Populism: The Humane Preference in America, 1890–1900* (1991) and Robert C. McMath's *American Populism: A Social History, 1877–1898* (1992). Clanton's study was more a history of Kansas Populism set in the national context than a study of the nationwide movement. McMath produced a social history of Populism that consciously balanced both western and southern experiences. Both authors emphasized the inherited influence of the republicanism of the American Revolution. But, unlike Richard Hofstadter, they portrayed such commitments in a favorable light.<sup>8</sup> Charles Postel now comes to us with an interpretation of Populism that deemphasizes these inherited cultural traditions, and portrays Populists as the ultimate modernists: scientifically minded and progressive in both their business and political lives.

Because the editor of this published "Roundtable Discussion" was honored to organize the Thirtieth Mid-America Conference on History, he put together a session focusing on Professor Postel's highly praised contribution to Populist scholarship. The panelists included Gregg Cantrell, Rebecca Edwards, Robert C. McMath, Jr., William C. Pratt, and, of course, Charles Postel.<sup>9</sup> All of the commentators have published extensively on the subject of Populism



*William Alfred Peffer, who was born in rural Pennsylvania in 1831, moved to Fredonia, Kansas, in 1870 after having lived in Indiana, Missouri, Illinois, and Tennessee. Like many in his day, Peffer was a man of many professions, including law; journalism, as the editor of the Fredonia Journal and the Coffeyville Journal; and politics, in which he served as a state senator in 1875 and 1876. In 1881 he moved to Topeka and founded the Kansas Farmer, an agricultural journal that championed reform and advanced the interests of farmers. Reluctantly, Peffer left the Republican Party to join the People's Party, and in 1891 he was elected the first Populist senator to the U.S. Congress. He did not win reelection to a second term, nor did he win his 1898 bid for the governorship of Kansas on the Prohibition ticket.*

6. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); abridged as *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). The subtreasury plan called for government operated storage facilities that would hold non-perishable farm produce off of a glutted market for a nominal fee until prices rose (but not for more than a year). In the meantime, farmers would receive subtreasury receipts equaling 80 percent of the current market value of their stored crops that could be used to pay debts. The plan was designed to keep southern cotton farmers from falling into the crop lien system (tenancy). In the West, however, it was the land rather than the crops that was mortgaged. At the insistence of Kansans, the plan was expanded to include low interest loans on land.

7. Two of the earliest studies that were critical of Goodwyn were Robert W. Cherny, "Lawrence Goodwyn and Nebraska Populism: A Review Essay," *Great Plains Journal* 1 (Summer 1981): 181–94; and Stanley B. Parsons, Jr., et al., "The Role of the Cooperatives in the Development of the Movement Culture of Populism," *Journal of American History* 69 (March 1983): 866–85.

8. O. Gene Clanton, *Populism: The Humane Preference in America, 1890–1900*, Social Movements Past and Present (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877–1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

9. The conference, which was sponsored by the Department of History at Missouri State University, was held in Springfield on September 25–27, 2008. After the session, Virgil W. Dean, the editor of *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*, and this author discussed the possibility of publishing these commentaries, and with the kind support of Professors Cantrell, Edwards, McMath, Pratt, and Postel brought the publication to fruition.



James Harvey "Cyclone" Davis was born in 1853 in South Carolina but was raised and made a life for himself in Texas. He served as a schoolteacher from 1875 until 1878 and later as a judge and then lawyer and newspaperman in Franklin County. Davis was a lecturer for the Farmers' Alliance and helped to establish the Populist Party through his work as an organizer and committeeman. In 1892 he ran unsuccessfully as the Populist Party's attorney general candidate in Texas and two years later was again unsuccessful as the party's candidate for the U.S. Congress. Davis ran as a Democrat in 1914 and was elected to one term in the House of Representatives, serving from March 4, 1915, until March 3, 1917. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

and/or related topics. What follows are their slightly revised remarks, plus this author's own commentary, which was not presented at the conference, but was solicited by the editor of *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* and encouraged by several of the session participants.

GREGG CANTRELL – TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY<sup>10</sup>

Many years ago I was a regular member of a brown-bag group presided over by the great southern historian John B. Boles at Rice University. I have long since forgotten the context, but one night Professor Boles remarked that there were two kinds of historians: "lumpers and splitters." Lumpers are those historians who have the ability to take a complex, multifaceted topic and tease from it one clear, straightforward thesis. Splitters are those who are sensitive to nuance, and who, recognizing the complexities and contingencies in any large, complicated topic, tend to emphasize multiple-causation rather than a single, overarching thesis. As the years have gone by, I have thought a lot about this commonsensical but highly perceptive comment. When I consider the canon of great historical works, most of them fall into the "lumper" category: Frederick Jackson Turner explaining American history by referencing the frontier experience; Charles Beard offering an economic interpretation of the Constitution; Arthur Schlesinger

defining the Age of Jackson; C. Vann Woodward reinterpreting the origins of the New South. In the firmament of Populist historiography, Lawrence Goodwyn's magisterial *Democratic Promise* stands as an exemplar of this tradition, arguing that the cooperative crusade of the Farmers' Alliance created the "movement culture" that defined Populism as the last best hope for an alternative to American corporate capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

As the toxic fumes of postmodernism have wafted over from English departments into the historical profession, great works of lumper-ism like Goodwyn's have become rarer. If there is no such thing as "truth," if all experience is subjective, if evidence is strictly in the eye of the beholder, then the craft of historical interpretation too often dissolves into an incoherent

10. Gregg Cantrell is the Erma and Ralph Lowe Professor of History at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including *Stephen F. Austin: Empresario of Texas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) and a study of Texas's leading African-American Populist, *Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). Professor Cantrell is currently writing a history of the People's Party in Texas.

11. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1920; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 1-38; Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1913); Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1945); Woodward, *Origins of the New South*; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*.

mass of half-baked theory backed by disjointed anecdote. The rise of cultural studies, frequently informed by nebulous constructs like “whiteness” and too often chained to the sacred troika of “race, class, and gender,” has further marginalized those of us who still think that old-timey endeavors like political history matter.<sup>12</sup> So imagine both my delight *and* trepidation when I discovered that a big new general study of Populism had just been published. I will confess that I expected the worst: Who *is* this Charles Postel, anyway? He is from *where? Berkeley??* What do they know about Cyclone Davis and Sockless Jerry Simpson out there in the land-of-all-things-trendy? I braced myself for my ultimate nightmare: Populism meets postmodernism.

As it turned out, they apparently know a great deal about Populism in California. (In fact, Californians in the 1890s knew a lot more about Populism than I realized, which was only one of the many revelations in this book.) And best of all, Charles Postel turned out to be a lumper extraordinaire, serving up the most original reinterpretation of Populism—based on extensive primary-source research and complete with an elegant, straightforward thesis—that we have seen since Goodwyn in the 1970s.

A week after I had ordered my copy of *The Populist Vision* and read it cover-to-cover, I was asked to review it for the *Journal of American History* (*JAH*). No sooner had I mailed in my embarrassingly laudatory review than I began to receive communications from my fellow scholars of Populism. Some complained of what they viewed as the selective nature of Postel’s analysis, for example that his coverage slighted the South, gave short shrift to the evangelical impulses of Populism, or overlooked the actions of Populists in Congress. More colleagues soon chimed in, highlighting other perceived omissions or overemphasis, some of which are discussed in the following essays. Thank goodness everybody was not as uncritical as I was! But every assessor of this book agreed, either grudgingly or readily, that it moves the scholarly conversation about Populism onto new ground—a major achievement. I will admit that after my initial sheepishness at having been so enthusiastic in my *JAH* review, I felt more than a little gratified to learn that the book had won both the Bancroft Prize and the Frederick Jackson Turner Award—the two highest honors accorded by our profession.<sup>13</sup>

Postel has accomplished this feat with his persuasively argued theme of the Populists-as-modernizers. At the risk of grossly oversimplifying his highly nuanced thesis, Postel suggests that the Populists took an approach toward the crushing inequities of Gilded Age America that, in essence, said, “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” In other words, Populists, by championing what they called “business methods,” embraced science, bureaucracy, and the power of the emerging national state in an attempt to fashion a version of capitalism more humane and equitable than the one that had seemingly left farmers and laborers behind. Building on the work of Lawrence Goodwyn, Robert McMath, Gene Clanton, and others, Postel credits the cooperative vision of Charles Macune and the Alliance with helping to solidify the Populist

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12. For an overview of “whiteness” studies, see Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America,” *Journal of American History* 89 (June 2002): 154–73.

13. Gregg Cantrell, review of *The Populist Vision*, by Charles Postel, *Journal of American History* 94 (March 2008): 1285.

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worldview; unlike others, Postel finds this worldview to be strikingly modern and forward-looking, largely discounting an element present in most past interpretations: that the Populists were drawing heavily from older, Jeffersonian notions of a simple producer-driven political economy.<sup>14</sup>

I fully understand where Professor Postel's critics are coming from. In one sense, this is old wine in new bottles: a number of scholars have posited that the Populists were in many respects "ahead of their time" in proposing programs such as the subtreasury plan to solve the problems of farm credit, commodity prices, and a contracted currency. Where Postel's work is most innovative is in his probing of the mindset of key Populist thinkers, and his success in linking them with the broader progressive outlook toward the modern state, society, and politics. In doing so, Postel has tackled, head-on, certain topics that have often proven problematic for previous scholars of Populism. Among these are the Populist relationship to organized labor, the prominence of unconventional religious beliefs among Populists, and especially the place of women in the movement. He has also succeeded in unhitching (when appropriate) the People's Party from what I perceive to be an often too-close attachment to the Farmers' Alliance. Much of Populist ideology, as Postel amply demonstrates, may have been rooted in the Alliance, but the Populist political coalition of the 1890s extended well beyond the neo-Jeffersonian farmers' "cooperative commonwealth" described by Goodwyn and others.

In my own work on Populism in Texas, I have long struggled with the problem of how to reconcile the evidence of Populist modernity with the rich social, religious, and political traditions that they drew upon to explain and justify their policies. Like Postel, I find modernism everywhere in Texas Populism, from the Populists' strikingly modernist religious beliefs and their program for reforming the political system to their innovative economic program. But I also continue to pay serious attention to the restorationist element in Populist thought—their fervent conviction that modern America had betrayed many of the fundamental principles of Christianity and republican government.<sup>15</sup> I am still in the midst of writing my own long-overdue book on the People's Party in Texas, but Postel's work has provided at least some of the answers for me as I struggle to make sense of my topic.

Finally, if single-handedly pointing Populist scholarship in a new direction were not achievement enough, Charles Postel should be commended for what *The Populist Vision* has done for the larger enterprise of political history, which in the past thirty years has been beset with vexing philosophical and methodological questions. In the 1960s and 1970s, practitioners of the "New Political History" rebelled against traditional top-down political history, focusing on the grassroots behavior of voters and heavily utilizing quantitative methods. More recently, as I alluded to at the beginning of this essay, a so-called "New, New Political History" has borrowed "heavily from either cultural history or organizational studies in the behavioral sciences and focuses on either symbolic meanings or the significance

14. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*; McMath, *American Populism*; Clanton, *Populism*.

15. Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

of policymaking institutions.” Although some new traditionalists have rebelled against that approach (Sean Wilentz has referred to it as “the bargain-base-ment Nietzsche and Foucault . . . that still passes for ‘theory’ in much of the American academy”), Postel shows us that political history need not be a slave to any one model. Neither a traditional narrative of leaders and elections, nor a quantitative analysis of voter behavior, nor a highly theoretical study, *The Populist Vision* charts a course that is simultaneously analytical, grounded in solid research, eminently readable, and highly original. For his part in liberating the craft of political history from the various straitjackets that it has all too often been forced into in recent years, we all owe Charles Postel a debt of gratitude.<sup>16</sup>

#### REBECCA EDWARDS – VASSAR COLLEGE<sup>17</sup>

In the spirit of the popular book, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, historians have long claimed that *Populists Were from the Gilded Age, Progressives Were from the Progressive Era*. They have depicted Populism as a phenomenon set apart from Progressivism, both chronologically and ideologically. The People’s Party is generally identified as a “farmers’ revolt” that arose during the corrupt and politically stagnant period known as the “Gilded Age.”<sup>18</sup> Progressives, on the other hand, were elite and middle-class city people who hailed from the more optimistic, reform-minded era that began after 1900. A brief discussion of this problem (because I do think it is a historiographical problem) may be a helpful way to suggest the significance of Charles Postel’s fine new book, *The Populist Vision*. Among other things, Postel challenges us to rethink our periodization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although 1900 has been the traditional starting point for the Progressive Era, that date has begun to move backward in the past few years. In a recent synthesis of Progressivism, for example, Maureen Flanagan starts



*A native of Pennsylvania, Mary Elizabeth (Clyens) Lease moved to Osage Mission, Kansas, at age twenty in 1870 to teach school. She married Charles L. Lease in 1873 and soon moved to Texas, where they remained for nearly a decade and where Mary Lease became involved in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. After returning to Kansas, she wrote newspaper columns, studied law, was admitted to the Kansas bar, and involved herself in several different reform movements. She is best known, however, as a Kansas Populist and fiery orator who implored farmers to “raise less corn and more hell,” despite the fact she may never have uttered the phrase and certainly was not its originator. Lease’s zeal and refusal to compromise eventually alienated her from mainstream Populists, and by 1896 she had turned her attention back toward other reform causes, including Prohibition and women’s suffrage.*

16. Chris Beneke, “The New, New Political History,” *Reviews in American History* 33 (September 2005): 314–24; Sean Wilentz, “Freedoms and Feelings,” review of *The Passions of Andrew Jackson*, by Andrew Burstein, *The New Republic Online*, April 3, 2003, [http://www.powells.com/review/2003\\_04\\_03.html](http://www.powells.com/review/2003_04_03.html).

17. Rebecca Edwards is the Eloise Ellery Professor of History and chair of the Department of History at Vassar College. She is the author of *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age, 1865–1905* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Professor Edwards is currently working on a biography of Kansan Mary Elizabeth Lease, the most prominent female Populist.

18. Mark Twain coined the term “Gilded Age” with the publication of his novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Co., 1873). Chronologically the term usually refers to the late nineteenth century.



"Perhaps we agree by now that there was no such thing as a representative Populist," argues Edwards, "as Postel skillfully shows, the movement included whites and blacks, farmers and miners, labor radicals, Baptist ministers, freethinkers, solid businessmen, and single-taxers. . . . [it] was a crossroads where they mingled for a brief time and exchanged contradictory ideas, assumptions, and agendas, before everyone headed off to join other projects." Lutie Lytle, who as a girl moved with her family from Tennessee to Topeka as part of the Exoduster movement and who would later become one of the first female African Americans to earn a law degree, entered into the Kansas Populist mix as the party's assistant enrolling clerk in the 1895 state legislature. Lytle's appointment to this patronage position was probably influenced by her father's involvement with the Populist Flambeau Club, an anti-Republican, integrated arm of the party in Topeka.

the Progressive Era in the 1890s. But she excludes the Populists, arguing that they were backward-looking and focused on "one particular group or issue," while Progressives developed "a comprehensive reform program." Similarly, Steven Diner names 1890 as the start of the Progressive Era. But his excellent chapter on rural America begins *after* the demise of Populism, which he dispenses with in his prologue, even though he defines Progressivism as a "struggl[e] to redefine the meaning of American democracy in the age of corporate capitalism."<sup>19</sup>

Historians who dismiss the Populists in this fashion overlook, in my view, profound connections between the People's Party and reform movements that followed. If Progressivism began around 1890 and if, as one historian puts it, it was a movement for "control of big business," "amelioration of poverty," and "purification of politics," then it is hard to see how one can exclude the Populists from it. Charles Postel, like other historians before him, demonstrates in rich detail that the Populists sought to create a more just economy, prevent poverty, and reform politics. Nonetheless, most U.S. history textbooks insist on stashing the Populists in a demoralizing chapter on the Gilded Age, called something like "Spoils, Scandals, and Stalemate." This chapter is usually filled with descriptors like "paralysis," "misrule," "discontent," "malaise," and "ordeal." I actually doubt that most undergraduates read this chapter. I suspect they take one look at the account of "corruption" and "party strife" and flip forward in search of something more inspiring.<sup>20</sup>

suspect they take one look at the account of "corruption" and "party strife" and flip forward in search of something more inspiring.<sup>20</sup>

19. Maureen A. Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890s–1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9–10; Steven J. Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 12–13, Populists on 18, 26–28.

20. The historian in question, Michael McGerr, identifies the "Progressive Movement" in the subtitle of his book as having taken place between 1870 and 1920, suggesting that he might integrate the Populists (and even the Greenbackers) into a vision of progressive state-building and anti-poverty activism. McGerr does touch briefly on the Grange and Farmers' Alliances in an opening chapter called "Signs of Friction." But, alas, here is his first mention of the Populists: "the vote totals of the People's Party, the greatest political expression of agrarianism, had lurched downward from a million in the presidential election of 1892 to a mere 50,000 in the national contest of 1900." So when we meet the Populists they are "suffer[ing] from . . . defeat and decline." Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement, 1870–1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), quotations from 29, xiv. Textbooks surveyed included Edward L. Ayers et al., *American Passages: A History of the American People* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt, 2000); Carol Berkin et al., *Making America: A History of the United States*, 4th ed. (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); John Mack Faragher et al., *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2000); Steven M. Gillon and Cathy D. Matson, *The American Experiment: A History of the United States*, 2nd ed. (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); James A. Henretta et al., *America's History*, 6th ed. (Boston, Mass.: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008); Patricia Nelson Limerick et al., *This Land: A History of the United States* (Maplecrest, N.Y.: Brandywine, 2003); Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States*, 6th ed. (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2001); James L. Roark et al., *The American Promise: A History of the United States*, 3rd ed. (Boston, Mass.: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005).

Postel's *The Populist Vision* helps erase the longstanding boundary between Populism and Progressivism, giving agrarian reformers a ticket into the Progressive club. In achieving this, Postel makes an important contribution to a trend that I hope will continue. His book complements, in particular, Elizabeth Sanders's *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (1999), which traces the critical agrarian contribution to Congress's passage of regulatory legislation, from the 1890s all the way up through the New Deal. Meanwhile, Connie Lester has identified continuities between Populists and Progressives in Tennessee. And Michael Kazin, in his recent biography of William Jennings Bryan, provides a refreshing portrait of the great agrarian who helped Democrats transform themselves into a modern, state-building party.<sup>21</sup>

For many reasons, it makes sense to think of the Populists as early Progressives. I have argued elsewhere, in fact, that we should abolish the Gilded Age altogether, and instead define a Long Progressive Era that began around 1880 and extended all the way up to the New Deal.<sup>22</sup> Given the constraints of this essay, however, I will leave that issue for another time and raise some questions about our definition of Populism itself.

Charles Postel continues, like historians before him, to look for the true heart or core of the Populist movement. That core, he says, was business-minded and scientific in outlook. "The creed of science," he writes, "served as a unifying strand within Populist thought. . . . The righteous, progressive, and modern society of the Populist imagination was to be built on empirically revealed and scientifically established truth."<sup>23</sup>

Postel is certainly correct in arguing that the Populists believed in science and modernization. He identifies an important thread in Populist thinking—one that has often been overlooked by historians who took a more romantic, agrarian view. But while Postel helps make the case that the Populists were early Progressives, I am not persuaded that Populists saw science as "the surest measures of morality and justice," as Postel writes. It seems to me that Joe Creech is also correct, in his recent book on North Carolina, in identifying evangelical Christianity as a central thread in Populist calls for morality and justice.<sup>24</sup> Populists also had many other sources on which to draw.

It might be helpful to think about this for a few minutes from the viewpoint of Mary Elizabeth Lease, the Populist whom I happen to know best. Now, Mary Lease may not have been the most representative Populist. But perhaps we agree by now that there was no such thing as a representative Populist: as Postel skillfully shows, the movement included whites and blacks, farmers and miners, labor radicals, Baptist ministers, freethinkers, solid businessmen, and single-taxers. So I will take Mary Lease as one measure of the movement and leave it to other historians to suggest alternative views.

21. Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Connie Lester, *Up From the Mudsills of Hell: The Farmers' Alliance, Populism, and Progressive Agriculture in Tennessee, 1870–1915* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006).

22. Rebecca Edwards, "Should We Abolish the Gilded Age?," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, forthcoming.

23. Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 21.

24. Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 21, emphasis added; Creech, *Righteous Indignation*.

Postel  
challenges us  
to rethink our  
periodization  
of the late  
nineteenth and  
early twentieth  
centuries. . . .  
giving agrarian  
reformers a  
ticket into the  
Progressive club.

There was certainly a “thread” of scientific thinking in Mary Lease’s thought. . . . but there were so many other threads, you could weave a tablecloth.

Mary Lease entered politics through the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1882, when she was living in Texas. She remained active in the WCTU throughout the 1880s, and in fact ran for local office on the Prohibitionist ticket after the family moved to Wichita, Kansas. Early on, Lease also absorbed the ideas of women’s rights advocates like Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller, and she moved directly from the WCTU into the movement for women’s suffrage. She regularly quoted abolitionists like Wendell Phillips and Lydia Maria Child. She thus had many definitions of social justice to draw on, none of them particularly scientific. It was these sources, I am sure, that informed her definition of Populism as “an echo of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, an honest endeavor . . . to put into practical operation the basic principle of Christianity: ‘whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.’”<sup>25</sup>

Lease also had an Irish immigrant background, and Irish nationalism framed much of her thinking about America’s place in the world, particularly as a counter to the power of Britain. Meanwhile, through her role in the Knights of Labor, Lease took on some of the perspectives of the labor movement. She read the Kansas free-thought journal *Lucifer the Light-Bearer* and became friends with sex radicals like Lois Waisbrooker and Tennessee Claflin.

What are we to make of all this? As Postel shows, there was certainly a “thread” of scientific thinking in Lease’s thought. She argued that science could “improve the race morally and physically,” though her main point was that humanity would progress when wives controlled sexual access to their own bodies and decided when to become mothers, an issue that was more legal and political than scientific.<sup>26</sup> My point is that science was one thread in Lease’s thinking, but there were so many other threads, you could weave a tablecloth. If you dig into the backgrounds and ideas of other leading Populists, you may find them equally complicated and diverse, which makes it very challenging to sum up *The (one and only) Populist Vision* in any coherent way.

A final, related thought: if the People’s Party is our measure, then Mary Lease became a Populist in 1890. When she joined the emerging party, she hoped it would merge with the economically progressive wing of the Prohibitionists, combining agrarian and labor platforms with a Prohibitionist and women’s rights agenda. This grand unified movement was a distinct possibility at the time of the St. Louis industrial conference in February 1892.<sup>27</sup>

By July 1892 it was clear that the People’s Party was not going to take up the platform and strategy Lease had hoped for, namely to adopt women’s suffrage and Prohibition, and send organizers to fan out through the

25. Lease quoted in Joan Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 155. On Lease more generally, see Dorothy Rose Blumberg, “Mary Elizabeth Lease, Populist Orator: A Profile,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 1 (Spring 1978): 3–15; Rebecca Edwards, “Mary Elizabeth Lease: Advocate for Political Reform,” in *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History*, ed. Virgil W. Dean (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 127–39.

26. Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 99–100; see also Laura L. Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pro-natalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890–1938* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

27. Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 12–13.

Northeast seeking a strong alliance with both industrial workers and urban reformers. By 1894, after the Republicans' overwhelming victory in the midterm elections, Lease saw that the Populists faced an impossible uphill fight. The country had taken a hard right turn in response to the economic depression, and with Republicans overwhelmingly dominant in both houses, the People's Party could not hope to wield the balance of power. By 1895 Lease was searching for other political vehicles to which she might hitch her reform wagon.

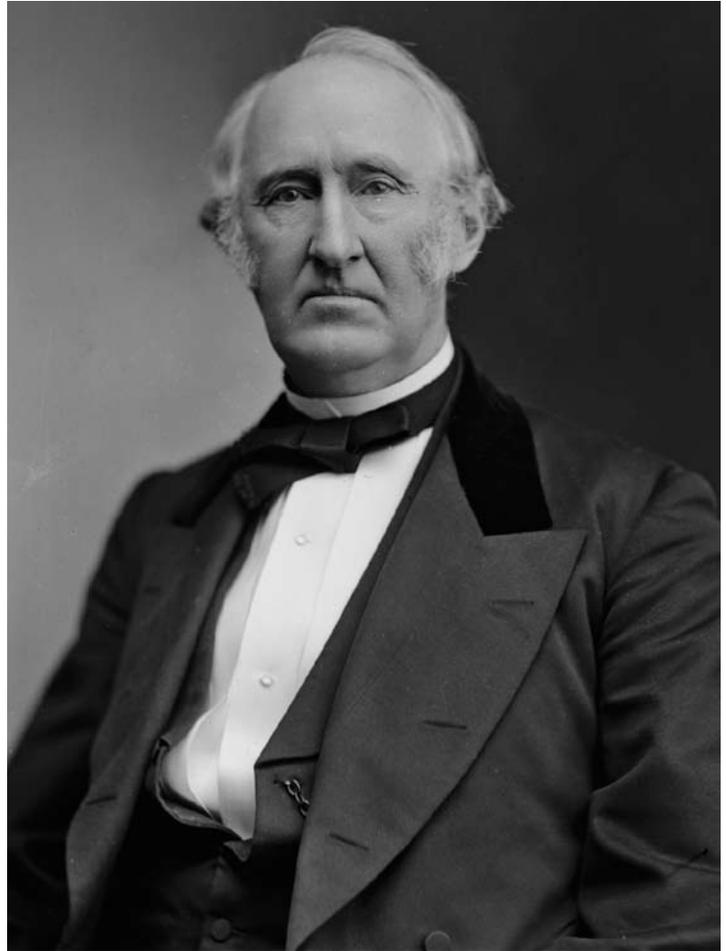
Thus, Lease was a committed Populist for no more than four of her eighty-three years. It makes sense to see her not as a Populist, but as a women's rights advocate who for a brief moment hoped the People's Party would serve as an effective vehicle. Perhaps the same was true for other labor leaders, businesspeople, farmers, miners, and voters: the People's Party was a crossroads where they mingled for a brief time and exchanged contradictory ideas, assumptions, and agendas, before everyone headed off to join other projects, from Eugene V. Debs's Socialist Party to the Anti-Saloon League to the California Fruit Growers Exchange.

Faced with both the internal diversity and the momentary existence of the Populist Party, I remain skeptical that we will ever pin down a single Populist vision. But Charles Postel illuminates aspects of the movement with insight and grace. He does so in a way that helps rescue the Populists from their status as a supposedly "backward-looking" farmers' revolt, isolated from broader trends of modernization and progressive thought. For readers of future U.S. history textbooks, Postel may have helped pluck the Populists out of that demoralizing chapter on Gilded Age "paralysis" and "stagnation." Instead, teachers and students may discover that the Populists were builders of our modern world, and that is no mean achievement.

**ROBERT C. McMATH, JR. – UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS<sup>28</sup>**

After reading *The Populist Vision*, many who are familiar with the literature on Populism may find themselves remembering Dorothy's comment to her little dog after the cyclone has deposited them in Oz: "Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore." Kansas and Texas are important in Charles Postel's significant new book, but California and Chicago are also key sites from which fresh insights spring. If a work that introduces readers to hundreds

28. Robert C. McMath, Jr., is dean of the Honors College and professor of history at the University of Arkansas. He is the author of *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers Alliance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); *American Populism: A Social History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); and numerous articles on Populism and related topics.



*Mary Lease was influenced by and regularly quoted reformers such as Wendell Phillips. A Boston lawyer and orator, Phillips was converted to abolitionism by William Lloyd Garrison in 1835, and, abandoning a potentially lucrative law practice, Phillips became active with Garrison in the American Anti-Slavery Society. After the Civil War, Phillips championed women's rights and the cause of temperance. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.*

Where some have viewed Populism as a fearful reaction to these changes, Postel's Populists optimistically embrace the new, seeking to "fashion an alternative modernity suitable to their own interests."

of individuals can be said to have central characters, Charles Postel's are not the iconic Tom Watson or James B. Weaver, but rather Charles Macune, father of the Farmers' Alliance's most ambitious cooperative and educational programs, and Marion Cannon, California cooperative leader, Los Angeles booster, and Populist congressman. And what intriguing cameo appearances besides! A Populist mayor of San Francisco shows up, and we hear about the Populist flirtations of Eugene V. Debs and even Clarence Darrow, who unlike his future antagonist William Jennings Bryan, actually stumped for the People's Party.

Postel situates American Populism within the context of economic and cultural globalization, a burst of science-based innovation in communications and transportation, and the consolidation of business into giant, complex organizations. But where some have viewed Populism as a fearful reaction to these changes, Postel's Populists optimistically embrace the new, seeking to "fashion an alternative modernity suitable to their own interests."<sup>29</sup>

Not surprisingly, Postel pairs Marion Cannon, whose blend of boosterism and cooperativism helped shape the Populist movement in California, with Charles Macune, an architect of the Alliance's whirlwind expansion from Texas across the South and cooperative booster *par excellence*. I would like to say a little about Macune and what we might call "booster Populism" before considering another potential pairing with Cannon, Leonidas L. Polk of North Carolina, whom Postel also treats sympathetically as an exemplar of the Populist vision.

Postel depicts more fully than anyone has the civic boosterism of the cooperative movement in the would-be metropolises of the West and South and their hinterlands. To do so he relies heavily on the wealth of written material that cooperativist and Populist leaders left behind, historical sources that were themselves made possible by advances in communications and transportation that spurred the mobilization of millions of Americans into social and political movements.

As useful as these sources are today for recovering the lost world of Populism, we need to remember that their authors had other purposes in mind besides preserving history. Through these texts leaders of a nascent and fragile movement presented a unified front to a public long accustomed to seeing groups like theirs flourish briefly and then collapse, and their schemes for beating the monopolists at their own game conveyed a vision of hope to men and women whose shaky hold on independence seemed threatened by giant trusts and economic depression. The rhetoric of "booster Populism" sometimes conceals as much as it reveals, like the promotional literature of agricultural historian Gilbert Fite's native South Dakota, where "every town site was a city, every creek a river, every crop a bonanza, every breeze a zephyr, and every man a damned liar."<sup>30</sup>

Charles Macune was a masterful rhetorician who managed to paper over, temporarily, the political divisions within the fledgling Texas Alliance and then to sell his brand of large-scale cooperation to farmers in the southern

29. Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 4.

30. Gilbert C. Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier, 1865-1900* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 101.

and plains states even while his own brainchild, the Texas Exchange, was collapsing. Despite Macune's consummate salesmanship, which Postel skillfully depicts, I remain skeptical about the depth and breadth of support among the rank and file for his grandiose plans, and those of others like him, for a National Farmers' Trust, for a cooperative railroad stretching from the upper Midwest to the Gulf of Mexico, and for similar schemes.

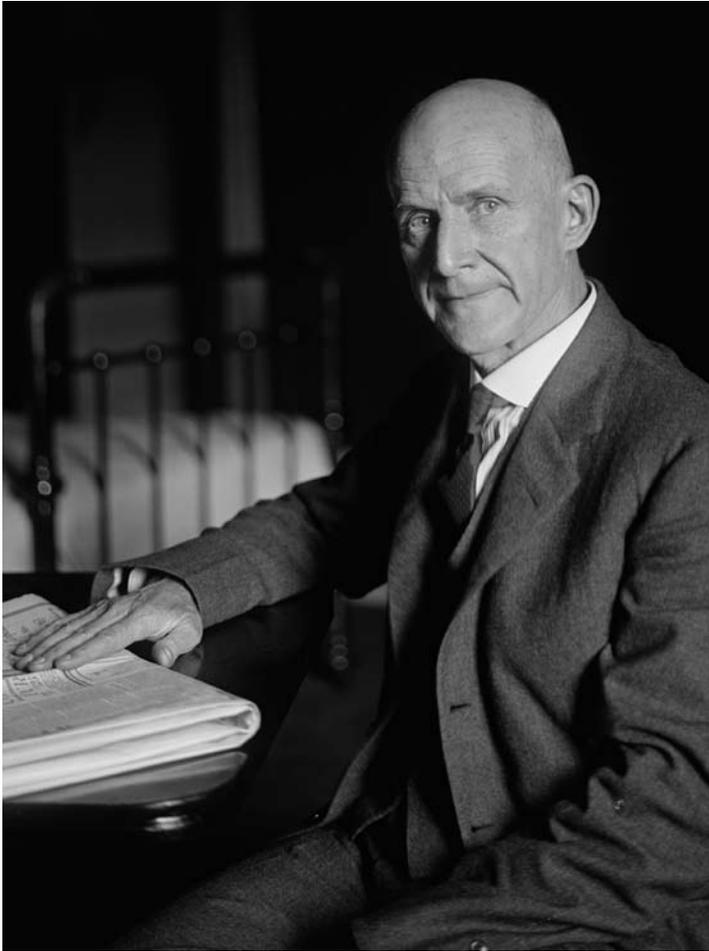
As much as Macune would have wished otherwise, the Populist movement was deeply divided in its intellectual underpinnings, *even though Populists with differing visions sometimes reached similar conclusions about what needed to be done*. Consider, for example, the different routes (the science of economics, cooperative experience, or traditional producerism) by which individuals came to view the subtreasury plan as the governmental solution to the ills of American farmers. As the book progresses, Postel's Populism increasingly resembles the business- and expert-led progressivism of the early twentieth century, and his depiction rings true to me. But at the same time—and frequently by the same individual—the Populist agenda was framed with visions of a just and humane society that its adherents had inherited through venerable traditions of political independence and producerism (those who produce things should reap the benefit of their labor); traditions that no more predisposed Populists to fear bigness in commerce or government than did faith in modernity.

The life of another potential costar for Marion Cannon illustrates this last point. Postel is certainly correct when he asserts that “next to Macune, [Leonidas] Polk was the Farmers' Alliance's most vital leader.” Had Polk not died in 1892, he would almost certainly have been the first People's Party nominee for President and might have lived to become an exemplar of progressive agriculture in the early twentieth century. Polk and Cannon actually shared the platform at the California State Alliance convention in Los Angeles in 1891, while the North Carolinian, as president of the National Farmers' Alliance, was on a coast-to-coast tour. Writing of that moment, I once had Polk imagining that “California just might be the place where the Alliance's project would be realized.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, as Professor Postel has noted, the two men shared a common vision of that project and what it could accomplish for America.

Like Cannon, Polk was a proponent of scientific agriculture. He made his own farm a model of progressive methods, helped create a state agricultural college (now North Carolina State University), and served as North Carolina's first commissioner of agriculture. After connecting with the Texas-based Alliance through the business-oriented Interstate Farmers' Association and as editor of the Raleigh *Progressive Farmer*, Polk became secretary of the state Alliance's Business Agency and a strong advocate of the Alliance's political platform, including the subtreasury plan. Polk defeated Macune and Arkansan Isaac McCracken in 1889 to become national president of the Alliance and he served as the movement's most effective spokesman for reconciliation, based on a shared political agenda, of American farmers and laborers across the sectional divide.

The Populist agenda was framed with visions of a just and humane society that its adherents had inherited through venerable traditions of political independence and producerism.

31. McMath, *American Populism*, 119; Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 50.



With the demise of the People's Party at the end of the nineteenth century, many former Populists found a political home in Eugene Victor Debs's Socialist Party. The Indiana native began organizing railroad workers in the 1870s and helped establish the American Railway Union in 1893. Debs founded in 1897 the Social Democratic Party of America, which became the Socialist Party of America in 1900, and was closely tied to Kansas during the early twentieth century by his association with the Socialist weekly, the *Appeal to Reason*, published in Girard, Kansas. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

In the context of Postel's work, what strikes me about Polk is not just his likeness to Marion Cannon, but his grounding in the antebellum expectation of science-based progress associated with John Quincy Adams and later with Henry Clay's American System. In his formative years Polk had been a Whig and "a disciple of Henry Clay" who championed the Whigs' broad-based crusades for "improvement." This was a moment in which the marvels of science and a particularly American brand of Christian thinking grounded in postmillennial eschatology fused to shape the political consciousness of a generation. It was a moment in which, to quote from a response to the scientific marvel of Samuel F. B. Morse's telegraph, "scarcely anything new will appear to be impossible."<sup>32</sup>

Polk came of age amid revolutions in transportation and communication that demonstrated the marvels of science and made possible the mobilization of citizens into a wide range of locally based but nationally focused sociopolitical movements, which mirrored a similarly modern form of association in Great Britain and Western Europe and prefigured the associational movements of the Populist-Progressive Era.<sup>33</sup> One of Postel's most important contributions is to remind us that alongside the gloom and depression of the 1890s there was an optimistic and forward-looking vision that spilled over from the seats of learning and discovery into the Populist movement, a vision based on the power of science to solve societal problems and create a better life for all.

Polk first encountered that vision not in the 1880s but in the 1850s just as he was coming of age and discovering local politics. In his corner of North Carolina the Whig party survived and flourished years after the national party had collapsed. It did so, in part, by championing a railroad for a transportation-poor region, but also by supporting appeals from local workingmen's associations for "equal taxation," meaning that poor non-slaveholding citizens would no longer have to pay a disproportional share of taxes while slave holders virtually escaped taxation on their slave property. Polk won election to the state legislature in 1860 as a champion of both.

In *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (2008), a book I recommend reading in tandem with *The Populist Vision*, Ronald Formisano argues persuasively for a long historical view of "small p"

32. Quoted in Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1858* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 697; and for Polk's formative years, see Stuart Noblin, *Leonidas LaFayette Polk, Agrarian Crusader* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1949), 40–43.

33. Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

populism. Formisano's populism stretches back to the Revolutionary era and focuses in particular on the first "modern" American social-political movements in the 1830s through the 1850s, including workingmen's associations and the Anti-Masonic and Know-Nothing movements. The various manifestations of Formisano's small p populism could be, "in the manner of reformers, restorationist and innovative at the same time."<sup>34</sup>

The Populist visions and structures of the 1890s owe as much to antebellum social movements—whether we label them "populist" or not—as to the modernizing program of Adams and Clay. And in North Carolina the Farmers' Alliance and People's Party were heavily influenced by antebellum traditions of "equal rights to all and special privileges to none" and "fair elections and an honest count," along with producerism and popular evangelical religion that possessed both innovative and restorationist strains.<sup>35</sup>

I like Professor Edwards's suggestion that we view Populism as an early phase of a "Long Progressive Era," but reflecting on Postel's and Formisano's important new books suggests an even longer view in considering Populism (or populism) as a movement. The juxtaposition of Cannon's success in California in mobilizing people around an alternative form of capitalism and Polk's roots in the Whig tradition suggests to me the value of looking backward as well as forward from the Populist moment of the 1890s, not only to the gospel of "internal improvement," which first envisioned a progressive America uplifted by governmental support of economic development, but also to venerable traditions of producerism and political independence. Together they formed a lasting vision grounded in the power of science, the power of markets, and the power of the people.

WILLIAM C. PRATT – UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA<sup>36</sup>

*The Populist Vision* is the kind of book that you could write a book about. It covers a wide range of topics related to Populism, demonstrating a deep knowledge of the subject, revisiting earlier interpretations, and advancing new ideas about this multifaceted movement. Charles Postel's work is a significant achievement, and the fact that we had a panel devoted to it even after it had won two of the historical profession's most prestigious awards is further testimony to its impact. But enough of that. Let me pursue another tack. Has Postel covered all the bases? Has he done what he said he would do? Do his conclusions hold up? Those are some of the questions, I suggest, that will preoccupy graduate students and others over the next decade. But perhaps I can touch upon a few other areas that might be worth exploring in greater depth in the future.

34. Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 12.

35. James M. Beeby, *Revolt of the Tar Heels: The North Carolina Populist Movement, 1890–1901* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008); Creech, *Righteous Indignation*, which focuses on North Carolina; Robert C. McMath, Jr., "Agrarian Protest at the Forks of the Creek: Three Subordinate Farmers' Alliances in North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 51 (Winter 1974): 41–63.

36. William C. Pratt is professor of history at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. He is the author of numerous articles on Great Plains history, including "From Montana to Moscow: Researching Rural Radicalism on the Northern Plains," *North Dakota History* 65 (Winter 1998): 2–16; and "Historians and the Lost World of Kansas Radicalism. Review Essay," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 30 (Winter 2007): 270–91.

Alongside the gloom and depression of the 1890s there was an optimistic and forward-looking vision . . . based on the power of science to solve societal problems.

For Postel,  
Populists were  
modern and he  
tells us this time  
and time again.  
I agree. . . .  
but what I find  
missing or  
minimized . . .  
is the  
conspiritorial  
rhetoric and  
anti-Semitism.

Early on Postel tells the reader that his “book explores what [Populist] men and women were thinking.” That is a very ambitious undertaking, particularly when he also seeks to answer the question: “Who were the Populists?” He throws his net wide, pulling in not only farmers and workers, but also “an array of nonconformists, including urban radicals, tax and currency reformers, prohibitionists, middle-class utopians, spiritual innovators, and miscellaneous iconoclasts.”<sup>37</sup> I am truly impressed with his discussion of the different groupings that made up the Populist coalition. This is no small accomplishment. One of his main points in the book is how innovative, how modern Populists were. Here, he tackles not only that old *bete noir* of progressive Populist historians, Richard Hofstadter, but newer, more contemporary social historians of the topic. For Postel, Populists were modern and he tells us this time and time again. I agree, or I agree much of the time. But then perhaps we might revisit that question: “Who were the Populists?” Postel provides us numerous quotations from a wide range of characters, some of them very familiar to students of Populism, including Charles Macune, Tom Watson, Mary Elizabeth Lease, and Eugene V. Debs, but what I find missing or minimized almost to the point of absence is the conspiratorial rhetoric and anti-Semitism that everybody who has ever researched in the Populist press has seen.

I might say that over the last twenty or twenty-five years, there has been a virtual conspiracy of silence on the topic of anti-Semitism by Populist historians generally. Yes, Hofstadter overstated it in *The Age of Reform*, but the list is too long of more contemporary scholars who have understated or not mentioned it all.<sup>38</sup> What should we make of this quotation from a South Dakota Populist paper?

At the expense of being called a heretic, we are opposed to permitting the Jews through Baron Rothchilds [*sic*] to continue crucifying Christ by oppressing His people. We concede that they are just as selfish, relentless, and cruel as they were 1900 years ago and that is why we earnestly protest against permitting them to control the commerce and industry of this nation.<sup>39</sup>

As another example, Virgil W. Dean found a former Populist editor who was an anti-Semitic isolationist subsequently arrested for sedition during World War II.<sup>40</sup> I do not want to suggest that anti-Semitism was a dominant thread in Populist thinking (or that it was uniquely Populist), but did not Postel come across some of it when he studied “what these men and women were thinking”?

One of the strengths of *The Populist Vision* is its breadth. It is not limited to the traditional Populist regions of the Deep South, the Great Plains, and the

37. Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 4, 12–13.

38. “It is not too much to say that the Greenback-Populist tradition activated most of what we have of modern popular anti-Semitism in the United States.” Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955). For an insightful critique of Hofstadter’s argument, see Robert M. Collins, “The Originality Trap: Richard Hofstadter on Populism,” *Journal of American History* 76 (June 1989): 150–67.

39. *Dakota Ruralist*, June 27, 1895.

40. Virgil W. Dean, “Another Wichita Seditious? Elmer J. Garner and the Radical Right’s Opposition to World War II,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 17 (Spring 1994): 50–64.

Mountain West. Postel covers Populist efforts in California and Chicago and a large number of figures including Clarence Darrow and Thomas Dixon, places and people usually ignored by other students of the subject. This breadth of treatment itself speaks to the significance of the book. It may be, however, that this broad focus has encouraged Postel to overlook developments in some of the strongest Populist states. For example, there is much more attention to California in his book than to Nebraska or South Dakota. Keep in mind that Nebraska Populists elected a U.S. senator, seven different congressmen, and two governors, one of whom served two terms. South Dakota also elected a Populist U.S. senator, two congressmen, and a two-term governor. And it might be pointed out that both of these plains states elected governors in 1896 and reelected them in 1898. I recognize that Postel did not set out to write a traditional political history, but he has overlooked a substantial body of scholarly work by his neglect of these two states.<sup>41</sup>

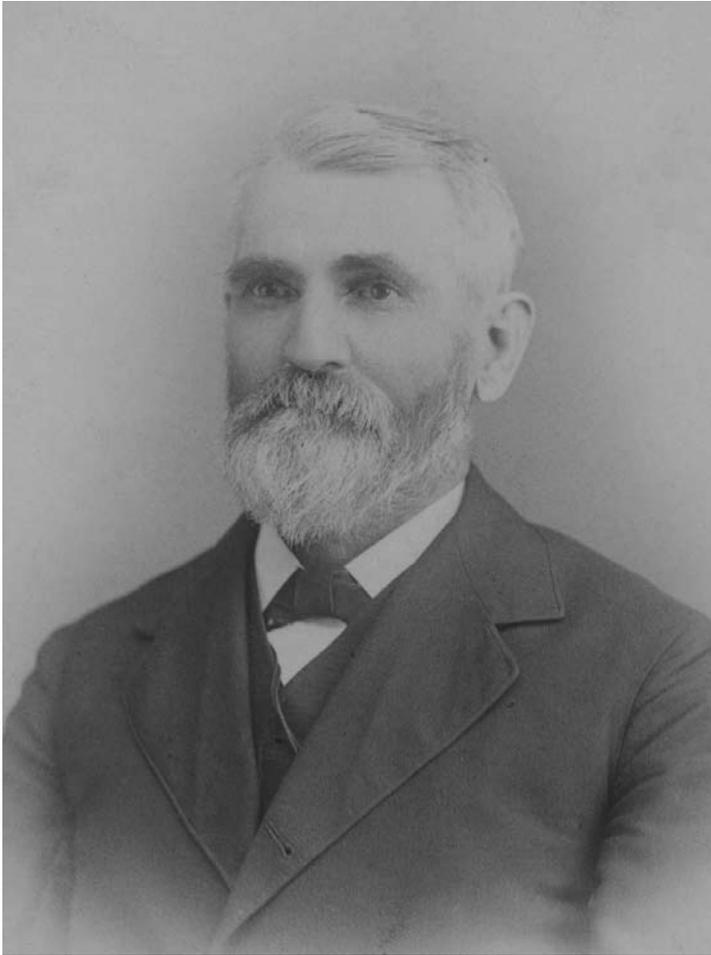
My last point is not so much a criticism as an elaboration upon Postel's conclusion that there are connections between Populism and twentieth-century developments. One of the strengths of this work is its attention to the Alliance movement and its treatment of it as a modern organization. Since *The Populist Vision* is organized topically, the reader does not get a clear idea when and how quickly the Alliance declined with the emergence of the People's Party. A shell of the organization persisted, but most of its members dropped out. In the post-Populist Era, however, a new farmers' movement appeared in the form of the Farmers Union. Many of its recruits, not to mention its founders, were veterans of the Alliance. This time, farmers' co-ops met with greater success, and, in the decades after World War I, a co-op crusade swept across the plains and parts of the Upper Midwest. Some observers saw it as "twentieth-century Populism" or "Populism-up-to-date."<sup>42</sup> Realistically, the



"One of the strengths of *The Populist Vision* is its breadth," explains William C. Pratt. "It is not limited to the traditional Populist regions . . . [but] covers Populist efforts in California and Chicago and a large number of figures . . . places and people usually ignored by other students of the subject." One of these is Clarence Darrow (pictured right), the Chicago attorney who defended Eugene Debs in the Pullman Strike case and, unlike his future "Scopes trial" antagonist William Jennings Bryan, stumped for the People's Party. Darrow is pictured here with Topeka corporate lawyer Thomas Francis Doran.

41. Stanley B. Parsons, *The Populist Context: Rural Versus Urban Power on a Great Plains Frontier* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973); Robert W. Cherny, *Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics, 1885–1915* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981); Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., "Some Political Aspects of the Populist Movement in South Dakota," *North Dakota History* 34 (Winter 1967): 77–92; John Dibbern, "Who Were the Populists? A Study of Grass-Roots Alliancemen in Dakota," *Agricultural History* 56 (October 1982): 677–91; and the following articles in *South Dakota History* 22 (Winter 1992): William C. Pratt, "South Dakota Populism and Its Historians," 309–29; D. Jerome Tweton, "Considering Why Populism Succeeded in South Dakota and Failed in North Dakota," 330–44; Terrence J. Lindell, "Populists in Power: The Problems of the Andrew E. Lee Administration in South Dakota," 345–65; and Daryl Webb, "'Just Principles Never Die': Brown County Populists, 1890–1900," 366–99.

42. Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900–1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964); William P. Tucker, "Populism-Up-to-Date: The Story of the Farmers' Union," *Agricultural History* 21 (October 1947): 198–208; John A. Crampton, *The National Farmers Union: Ideology of a Pressure Group* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965). See also William C. Pratt, "Where Do We Go From Here? Historians and Farm Movements on the Northern Plains," *Journal of the West* 31 (October 1992): 59–70.



The Populist Vision focuses much attention on California, which elected three different Populists to the U.S. Congress between 1892 and 1898, but the third party had much more electoral success in the plains states. Nebraska Populists, for example, elected a U.S. senator, seven different congressmen, and two governors, one of whom served two terms, during the party's single decade of prominence; and Kansas sent five Populist congressman and one senator to Washington, D.C., in 1891, during the very first year of the party's existence. One of those Kansans was John Davis, a successful farmer, newspaperman, and reform politician, who had moved his family from Illinois to a farm near Junction City in 1872. Congressman Davis won a second term in 1892 but lost his bid for a third two years later.

Farmers Union had more success and greater staying power in a number of states than the Alliance ever did. Perhaps in some places it was at its peak in the 1940s and 1950s, but it had an extended history that may offer additional perspective to the agrarian efforts of the 1880s and 1890s. I do not want to romanticize this story, but Farmers Union people shared a lot with their counterparts of the earlier century. Some of them were forward-looking, well informed, and eager to work with organized labor and urban reformers. Others do not fit that description by any stretch of the imagination, and still others, well, we really do not know much about them at all. This last group certainly had its counterpart in the earlier movement. Despite the very real achievement of *The Populist Vision* and that of three generations of historians that preceded it, we still have a lot to learn about who the Populists were.

WORTH ROBERT MILLER – MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY<sup>43</sup>

Charles Postel's *The Populist Vision* provides us with a powerful argument that the Populists of the 1890s were forward-looking modernizers. They had a thirst for modern scientific knowledge, were business oriented, and eagerly sought efficiency, both in agriculture and government. Their views on race fell into lockstep with contemporary "progressive" notions of white supremacy. Even their political views "embraced a nonpartisan, managerial, and government-as-business vision," ideas that would dominate the Progressive Era yet to come.

Many historians have seen the Populists as essentially forward-looking. None, however, has gone into the detail that Postel has to demonstrate their scientific and business orientation. He has garnered an impressive array of evidence from all parts of Populist country for this view. In addition, *The Populist Vision* has established the place of California in the Populist movement as one of importance, just as Lawrence Goodwyn did for Texas, C. Vann Woodward did for the South, and James Wright and Robert Larsen did for the Rocky Mountain states. The importance of plains Populism, of course, has always been accepted, although more so after John D. Hicks's 1931 magnum opus, *The Populist Revolt*.<sup>44</sup>

43. Worth Robert Miller is the author of *Oklahoma Populism: A History of the People's Party in the Oklahoma Territory* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987) and numerous articles on Populism, including "A Centennial Historiography of American Populism," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 16 (Spring 1993): 54–69; and "Building a Populist Coalition in Texas, 1892–1896," *Journal of Southern History* 74 (May 2008): 255–96.

44. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*; Woodward, *Origins of the New South*; James Edward Wright, *The Politics of Populism: Dissent in Colorado* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Robert W. Larson, *Populism in the Mountain West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*.

*The Populist Vision* provides an excellent antidote to interpretations of Populism as nostalgic, backward-looking, and largely outside the mainstream of modern currents. As earlier commentators noted, the best of these overly negative interpretations came from Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1956. Hofstadter argued that Populists were provincial, conspiracy-minded, and had a tendency toward scapegoatism that manifested itself as anti-Semitism, anti-intellectualism, and Anglophobia. Interpretations countering the Columbia professor's assertions came fast and furious during the ensuing decades. Even so, Hofstadter's interpretation has lingered on, and to some degree can be seen in James Turner's 1980 article "Understanding the Populist," which portrayed Populists as feeling "cruelly hoodwinked" because of their alleged social isolation.<sup>45</sup> Has Charles Postel completely demolished Hofstadter's overly negative interpretation of Populism? Certainly he has on the issues of provincialism and anti-intellectualism. Postel's extensive research on Populist interest in modern, scientific agricultural methods likewise surely undermines Hofstadter's vision of the average Populist farmer as nothing more than "a harassed little country businessman."<sup>46</sup>

Like most historical interpretations, Hofstadter's vision dominated for a while and probably still has a few supporters. Rhetoric, however, almost always has some grounding in reality, even if it be tenuous. As William C. Pratt noted, *The Populist Vision*, does not significantly address some of Hofstadter's most challenging assertions, namely their alleged conspiracy-mindedness, scapegoatism, and commitment to the "agrarian myth." Populists generally used anti-Semitism and Anglophobia as metaphors. Their references to Jews or Shylock almost always had something to do with banking institutions. Rarely did they refer to religion or ethnicity, although Pratt's example appears to cross the line on religion, and probably ethnicity, too. This is further testimony to the diversity within Populism. But, as Professor Pratt noted, anti-Semitism was not central to Populism. We must also remember that modern sensitivity to anti-Semitism, nativism, and racism are generally products of the post-World War II era. Clearly some Populist jargon was anti-Semitic. They used anti-Semitism as a folk stereotype, a form of shorthand that conjured up images designed to portray professional money lending in an unfavorable light. In doing so, they invoked a well-worn stereotype that was centuries old and still quite respectable in the 1890s.

On the topic of Anglophobia, Populists considered Britain to be the quintessence of unwarranted privilege. Before the twentieth century, the whole western world (with the periodic exception of France and Latin America) was ruled by some form of institutionalized privilege (Britain's House of Lords, for instance, could block popular legislation as late as 1905). Creating a republic under such circumstances clearly committed the early American nation to some degree of egalitarianism. Nineteenth-century Americans were quite cognizant of their role as the vanguard of republican forces worldwide,

45. Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*; James Turner, "Understanding the Populists," *Journal of American History* 67 (September 1980): 369. Stacy G. Ulbig and I take issue with the concept of Populists being socially isolated in "Building a Populist Coalition in Texas, 1892-1896," *Journal of Southern History* 74 (May 2008): 255-96.

46. Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 46.

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which they considered a progressive trend. Late nineteenth-century Anglophobia, including that of the Populists, clearly was rooted in the nation's more-than-century-old commitment to republicanism. Populist conspiracy-mindedness likewise is hard to deny given their penchant for bandying the word "conspiracy" about so extensively. It, too, almost certainly was a product of the American Revolution. Even the most cursory reading of the Declaration of Independence will reveal the most intense conspiracy-mindedness among our Founding Fathers.

Many scholars, including myself, have found significant doses of what modern scholars have termed the republicanism of the American Revolution in Populist literature. Richard Hofstadter, who was a Marxist as a youth, labeled this backward-looking. How much of his denunciation of Thomas Jefferson's republican ideals is the product of early- and mid-twentieth-century Marxists finding anything short of Marxism to be inadequate? If this is to be our standard, then present-day appeals for a middle-class America that appear to echo Jefferson's call for a relatively egalitarian nation make modern liberals backward-looking, too.

This is the point where I wonder if the dichotomy of backward-looking versus forward-looking is helpful. Can a late nineteenth-century farmer, laborer, or middle-class urban reformer be committed to values derived from the republicanism of the American Revolution and still be a modernizer? Republicanism, like any other body of ideas, developed, even mutated, over time (as for ideas mutating, please note that the teaching of evolutionary science today rarely includes the Social Darwinistic component that students would have encountered during the Gilded Age). By the late nineteenth century, an advocate of republican individual liberties in the Jeffersonian tradition could believe that an activist, big government that regulated or broke up monopolistic entities provided the best method of securing economic liberty in the marketplace. In other words, because of the changed circumstances of late nineteenth-century America, concerns about individual liberty could trump commitment to small government in the minds of many (although not all) who considered themselves Jeffersonian.

The Populists' Omaha Platform of 1892 began with a preamble written by novelist Ignatius Donnelly that was steeped in republican imagery. It speaks of America "degenerating into European conditions" and charges the fabulously rich with "despising the Republic and endangering liberty." The preamble then contended that the power of government "should be expanded." But before going into the specifics, it called for "all men to first help us to determine whether we are to have a republic to administer." The implication was that the recent growth of personal fortunes threatened to establish a superior class of the privileged—an unrepublican American aristocracy. Yet, when we turn to the body of the platform, we find all of the modernizing demands that Professor Postel has emphasized—the subtreasury plan, bureaucratic administration of the railroads and the banking system, the initiative, the referendum, and the secret ballot. I have never seen any evidence that the delegates to the Omaha convention found the melding of these republican sentiments and modernizing demands to constitute a non-sequitur. The platform was enthusiastically accepted in its entirety, and is still considered the Bible of Populism by scholars today.

Early in *The Populist Vision*, Professor Postel acknowledges that “Populists’ ideas had roots in the traditions of their ancestors.”<sup>47</sup> I fear his emphasis upon modernization has caused him to diminish the importance of other major traditions that shaped the values Populists used to analyze their situation and propose solutions to their problems. Farmer cooperatives, for instance, could implement not only modern business methods, but also producer control over the fruits of their labor, the latter of which is a manifestation of the economic liberty so important to those steeped in republican values. We are learning that Populists drew from many sources to explain, and attempt to improve, their world. Charles Postel has made a major contribution to this process by bringing to the forefront his well-documented elaboration of the business and scientific sources that influenced Populists.

All people use the lessons of both their past and present to help guide them. Republicanism and Christianity, as well as modern business methods and scientific knowledge, provided prominent value systems that Populists employed in their search for truth and justice. None of these commitments necessarily meant that Populists were backward-looking. As Charles Postel and others have clearly shown, they did not wallow in a sea of self-pity in the face of their troubles. They applied themselves to finding rational and realistic solutions that foreshadowed, and in many instances contributed directly to, twentieth-century progressive trends.

**CHARLES POSTEL – CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO<sup>48</sup>**

I thought that it might be helpful by way of response to start with some words about my Berkeley education, how that education shaped the writing of my book, and what that might mean for some of the questions that have been raised in the preceding essays. Graduate seminars at Berkeley were filled with wonder and mystery, and no book we read seemed more mysterious to me than Charles Grier Sellers’s *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (1991). A simple premise lay at the heart of this smart and intricate book: the first decades of the nineteenth century were driven by the resistance of sturdy farmers to the invasion of market society. On the one side stood the canal boosters, southern and western staple producers, shippers, and distillers, who “sought to turn the republic irrevocably toward its



*Novelist and orator Ignatius Donnelly, a former Republican congressman (1863–1869) from Minnesota who helped energize the Patrons of Husbandry (Grange) and other efforts to organize farmers in Minnesota in the 1870s and 1880s, was one of the outstanding Populist leaders of the 1890s. He wrote the famous preamble to the Omaha Platform of 1892 that was steeped in republican imagery. It speaks of America “degenerating into European conditions” and charges the fabulously rich with “despising the Republic and endangering liberty.” The preamble then contended that the power of government “should be expanded.” He received the People’s Party nomination for vice president in 1900, running on a ticket with Wharton Barker of Pennsylvania.*

47. Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 11.

48. Charles Postel is assistant professor of history at California State University, Sacramento. He is currently working on two books on Gilded Age and Progressive Era reform movements.

Leonidas L. Polk of North Carolina, whom Postel treats sympathetically as an exemplar of the Populist vision, was born into a slave-owning family in North Carolina on April 24, 1837. He was a former Whig, a state legislator, a reluctant secessionist, and a veteran of the Confederate army, who became in 1887 the leading figure of the Southern Farmers' Alliance. A long-time proponent of scientific agriculture, Polk would almost certainly have been the first People's Party presidential nominee had he not died in 1892, and he most likely would have become a model of progressive agriculture in the early twentieth century. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

capitalist destiny." On the other side, "all that stood in their way was the anticommercial animus of a democratic countryside." Sellers's descriptive metaphors drew the battle lines in stark relief, with rural lawyers acting as "the shock troops of capitalism."<sup>49</sup>

Reading *The Market Revolution* planted seeds for later inquiry. I wanted to better understand the meanings of this "democratic countryside." Did it make any sense, for example, to refer to a rural majority ("a democratic countryside") if it excluded the staple producers or the aspiring ones? What about the farmers who looked forward to the price of their land rising with the proximity of canals, shippers, or distillers? What about the rural mothers and fathers who would be proud to have their sons get an education and become a rural lawyer? If rural lawyers constituted the "shock troops" of the market economy, who then made up the regular infantry?

I never resolved such questions; the "democratic countryside" remained elusive. It made logical sense as part of the theoretical construction of a "market revolution." Yet, it proved difficult to spot, much less closely examine in the historical evidence. In physics scientists make calculations about dark energy. They cannot see it and even the most sensitive devices cannot detect it. But physicists are sure it is there because without dark energy their theoretical calculations about the evolution of the universe would not hold. Perhaps the theoretical construction

of the early nineteenth-century "market revolution" relied on such elusive material.

Preparing for my oral exams I was especially drawn to the scholarship on late nineteenth-century reform movements. One point of interest was the presence of a quite similarly elusive substance in some of the best works about the Populist movement. Such masterful historians as C. Vann Woodward and Lawrence Goodwyn refuted the claims of Richard Hofstadter and other mid-century scholars that within Populism lay the seeds of reaction and intolerance. With the Populist revolt, Woodward and Goodwyn argued, the force of rural democracy showed its promise.<sup>50</sup> But this promise rested on assumptions that were nearly as difficult to measure as the stuff of Sellers's "democratic countryside." My own research posed a number of historical problems, not the least of which was the nature of Populism's promise. To what extent was Populism democratic, majoritarian, or something else? What did Populism represent in terms of ideas, politics, and society? *The Populist Vision* is the result of that effort.

49. Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 47, 69.

50. Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 235–63; C. Van Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," in *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), 141–66; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*.

Gregg Cantrell has noted that if historians are divided by tendency into “lumpers and splitters,” my study of Populism falls into the “lumper” category and stands as an effort to place a complex phenomenon into a relatively well-defined historical framework. This is not without its hazards. As Rebecca Edwards reminds us, any attempt at relatively simple definitions of a movement that touched millions of lives and spanned a continent is something of a fool’s errand. Moreover, those of us who try would be double fools not to learn everything we can about nuance and difference from our “splitter” colleagues. But I would suggest that “lumping” has its analytical rewards.

Let us take the example of Leonidas L. Polk of North Carolina and his rise to national prominence within the Populist coalition. Robert C. McMath, Jr., suggests pairing Polk and his fellow booster Populists, Texan Charles Macune and Californian Marion Cannon. Such a pairing works well. Just look at the reception that Polk received from the crowd in Los Angeles’ Hazard Pavilion during his 1891 tour of California. Born into a slave-owning family in North Carolina, Polk was a Confederate veteran and the leading figure of an organization known as the Southern Farmers’ Alliance. When Polk rose to speak, the crowd jumped up on chairs and shouted their lungs out with excitement.<sup>51</sup> Was the enthusiasm for Polk misplaced? Or did the Los Angeles crowd recognize strands of common interest? Perhaps the farmers and growers in the audience shared common aims in scientific farming, agricultural marketing, and diversification into fruit and vegetable growing. Polk, after all, was one of the South’s leading advocates of scientific farming, and had worked for years to rationalize Carolina truck farming and fruit growing in the hopes of conquering the Philadelphia and New York markets.

Then there is the matter of race. When Polk spoke to the assembled Populists in Los Angeles he appealed for sectional reconciliation. At the heart of his appeal was a potent strand of white nationalism. California Populists, with their own history of anti-Chinese agitation, embraced the appeal. The most relevant fact about Polk’s nationalist rhetoric was how unoriginal it was. Polk had lifted his white nationalism straight from the speeches of his friend and colleague Henry Grady, the leading spokesperson of the New South elite. It was not just Polk. Tom Watson also plagiarized from Grady his celebrated phrases about poor blacks and whites sharing “identical” interests.<sup>52</sup>

Scholars have used the Populist example to explore the nuanced divisions within the southern white population when it came to race. According to Woodward, Goodwyn, and other scholars, the white elite made use of segregation and Negrophobia to disrupt the promise of cooperation between the white and black poor.<sup>53</sup> This analysis rests on a theoretical construction that assumes a division on racial matters between the white urban New South elite and the white rural folk. But in recent years scholars have increasingly recognized that this division may be mostly a theoretical one. It is a division that grows more elusive when the words of Polk and Watson

51. *Garden City Alliance*, in the *Advocate* (Topeka), November 11, 1891.

52. Henry W. Grady, “Mr. Grady in Dallas,” in *Life and Labors of Henry W. Grady, His Speeches, Writings, etc.* (Richmond, Va.: Franklin, 1890), 186; *People’s Party Paper*, September 16, 1892.

53. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); Lawrence C. Goodwyn, “Populist Dreams and Negro Rights: East Texas as a Case Study,” *American Historical Review* 76 (December 1971): 1435–56.

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represent in terms  
of ideas, politics,  
and society?



A close friend and colleague of Leonidas Polk, Henry W. Grady of Georgia was the leading spokesperson of the New South elite. Both Polk and Tom Watson “plagiarized from Grady his celebrated phrases about poor blacks and whites sharing ‘identical’ interests,” writes Postel. Grady was born in 1859 and became an influential Atlanta Democrat and managing editor of the Atlanta Constitution, who pursued a postwar vision for his region based on diversified agriculture, industrial growth, northern investment, and white supremacy. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

are juxtaposed to those of Henry Grady. Examining the response to Grady’s speeches at Farmers’ Alliance rallies produces similar results. Indeed, as the legislative record confirms, if the New South elite directed the campaign for the Jim Crow laws of the 1890s, the laboring folk of white Populism provided the infantry.

This conclusion is not where my research began. I had been intrigued by the experiments in biracialism provided by, for example, the Knights of Labor and the Agricultural Wheel. One of my first papers in graduate school was on the multiracial appeal of Jacob Coxe and his “industrial army” of the unemployed, a small episode of racial tolerance and interaction that would perhaps open a window into a Populist multi-racial democracy. But as my research into Populism unfolded from the Los Angeles basin to the Carolina Piedmont, it soon became evident that within the multiplicity of Populist currents such multi-racial experiments were eddies in a white nationalist tide.

The term *white nationalism* fits because that was the type of nationalism that Polk and other Populists emphasized, as in “this is a white man’s country.”<sup>54</sup> Their nationalism translated into an organizational and legislative agenda—much of which the Populists successfully put into effect—to reinforce segregation and white supremacy. But one of the conundrums the Populists faced was how to draw the boundaries.

Who was white and who was not? In regard to Jews and their alleged conspiracies, the issue of Populist anti-Semitism has been thoughtfully revisited by Jeffrey Ostler and Robert D. Johnston.<sup>55</sup> In *The Populist Vision*, I point to the fact that the Populists “often shared with the business elite implicitly anti-Semitic views about the role of ‘Shylock’ in the economy.” Indeed, Shylock stood in for the greedy banker in widely circulated Populist writings. But in my reading of the Populist literature, this anti-Semitism was metaphorical and absent discussion of actual Jews, much less a call to action against the Jewish population.<sup>56</sup> In that regard, the anti-Semitic editorial that William C. Pratt cites from the *Dakota Ruralist* stands out because it does suggest that at least on occasion Jews, too, were direct targets of Populist nationalist rhetoric.

In exploring the nature of Populism, how representative were leaders such as Polk, Watson, Cannon, or Macune? The precise dynamic between

54. *People’s Party Paper*, July 15, 1892; *Southern Mercury*, in McMath, *Populist Vanguard*, 46.

55. Jeffrey Ostler, “The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism,” *Agricultural History* 69 (Winter 1995): 1–27; Robert D. Johnston, “The Age of Reform: A Defense of Richard Hofstadter Fifty Years On,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6 (April 2007): 127–37.

56. Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 152, 319n47.

the leaders and the led poses one of the most vexing problems of social movement history. Populist scholarship has tended to emphasize the fissures between the rank and file and the leadership regarding such matters as scientific farming, boosterism, silver inflation, and political fusion. Exploring these fissures was part of my research plan. However, the deeper my research went the more intangible the fissures became. More often than not, my assumptions about tensions between the rank and file and the leadership turned out to be precisely that, assumptions—most of which were difficult to verify or to attribute significance. Take the fusion negotiations for electoral agreements between the People’s Party and the traditional Democratic and Republican Parties. Some of the Populist membership bridled at the specific deal-making of their leadership. But what significance should be attached to this given that the Populist rank and file was as divided as the leadership on the larger question of fusion?

Or take the example of Charles Macune’s scheme for the Texas Farmers’ Alliance Exchange, a booster’s dream of large-scale marketing and development. It is a good example, because unlike so many other Alliance projects it proved especially divisive. I suspect that many Texas farmers outside of the Alliance did not know or care much about Macune and his booster plans. That cannot be said, however, about the membership. The Farmers’ Alliance was an organized movement, defined by its networks of lecturers, newspapers, and sub-alliance educational system. From their newspapers, letters to the editor, course syllabi, and lecture notes, as well as the minutes of their sub-alliance meetings, there is abundant documentation that rank and file Alliance members knew about and hoped for the success of Macune’s business scheme, at least in its general outlines. Poorer Alliance members, who could not pay their two-dollar shares, resented the financial barriers to taking part in the business. Other Alliance members criticized Macune’s business management. But if there is evidence of a significant Texas Alliance constituency that rejected the boosterism of not only Macune, but also the lecturers, editors, secretaries, county and state executives, business agents, and the rest of the Populist cadre, it has yet to come to light.

A similar point pertains to the question of science and religion. Since the mid-1960s, when E. P. Thompson wrote about Methodism as the religion of the English working class, American social historians have built up a narrative in which evangelical Christianity corresponded to the worldview of the lower classes in the American heartland, while modern secularism was the terrain of cosmopolitan elites.<sup>57</sup> This pattern has largely held in the Populist scholarship. Perhaps this telling works best in North Carolina where, as Joe Creech’s recent work has carefully documented, the Populists enjoyed close relations with Baptist and other evangelical churches. The telling gets more complicated in Texas, where Populist ties to organized churches were spotty, and where the Swedeborgians and other liberal and heterodox sects attracted an unusually large number of Populists. Kansas Populists engaged in an irreverent rhetorical war on the Protestant churches. And, in California,

If the New South elite directed the campaign for the Jim Crow laws of the 1890s, the laboring folk of white Populism provided the infantry.

57. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); Herbert G. Gutman, “Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age,” in *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 79–117.

Rather than posing questions of science versus religion, it would shed more light to look at Populist thought through the dynamic spectrum of late nineteenth-century religious conflict.

if a Populist did happen to show particular interest in religion it would likely be in spiritualism, Eastern mysticism, or some other non-Christian belief system.<sup>58</sup>

When Polk, who served as a lay officer in the North Carolina Baptist Church, came to Los Angeles he was in familiar spiritual company. Theosophists and Baptists spoke a common language of “doing good.” To understand why this was so we need to look more closely at what was unfolding within the evangelical churches. The “war of creeds” over higher criticism, comparative religion, and evolutionary biology was in full swing. North Carolina Populists were acutely attuned to the warfare. Their preferred theologian was North Carolina native Thomas Dixon, Jr., who would later make a fortune writing racist novels, but who first gained national prominence as a Baptist minister in Boston and New York. From the pulpit he pushed the boundaries of scientific secularism to the point that he eventually renounced the church altogether. But before Dixon abandoned organized religion, his sermons were regularly published in North Carolina’s Populist press. Not just in the Tar Heel state, but across the South and Midwest, newspaper editors and lecturers informed the Populist membership about the religious wars, making no secret of their sympathy for the liberal, secular camp. I have yet to uncover evidence suggesting that the rank and file contested the religious preferences of the Populist editors and lecturers. That is not to say all North Carolina farmers sympathized with Dixon’s science-based theology. But, again, to treat Populism as an organized movement, its religiosity cannot be understood without Dixon.<sup>59</sup>

We need to reconsider the historical schema by which science was the property of the urban elite and evangelical piety belonged to the lower classes of the heartland. Here an often overlooked insight of E. P. Thompson might be helpful. In discussing early nineteenth-century religion in England, he observed that Methodist theologians no longer considered Catholicism their primary threat; the new danger came from the appeal of Thomas Paine and his agnosticism among English workers. English Methodism, Thompson noted, adapted its appeal accordingly.<sup>60</sup> A similar phenomenon took place with the scientific and secular enthusiasms in post-Civil War America. Farmers and laborers proved as susceptible to these enthusiasms as anyone else. We need that context to understand Populist religiosity. Rather than posing questions of science versus religion, it would shed more light to look at Populist thought through the dynamic spectrum of late nineteenth-century religious conflict, spiritual innovation, and secular adaptation.

Finally, a brief comment about historical periodization: I sympathize with Rebecca Edwards’s efforts to bring down the artificial barriers between Populism and Progressivism. I fear, however, that cobbling together a long Progressive Era will not be without trade offs. Perhaps it will make it that much more difficult, for example, to explain why historians would give the “progressive” designation to such a barbaric epoch in American race

58. Creech, *Righteous Indignation*; Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 255–65.

59. Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 251–53.

60. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 96.

relations. I also sympathize with Robert J. McMath, Jr.'s observations about Leonidas Polk and his early experience with the antebellum Whig politics of "improvement." As Gregg Cantrell has so eloquently shown us with his study of slave-owning Whig Kenneth Rayner and his black Populist son John Rayner, Populism had myriad pre-Civil War roots.<sup>61</sup> The ongoing reevaluation of Populism carries much promise for making the movement more tangibly linked to both its antebellum past and its Progressive Era future. One can only hope that as the mysterious "democratic countryside" dissipates as a force of historical explanation a better understanding of the long nineteenth century is coming into focus. KH

The ongoing reevaluation of Populism carries much promise for making the movement more tangibly linked to both its antebellum past and its Progressive Era future.

61. Cantrell, *Kenneth and John B. Rayner*.