

**Nineteenth-Century American Populism in Historical Perspective:
Between Scholarship and Politics**
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Populism in the United States has a long history, stretching back to the so-called “Gilded Age”, the late-nineteenth-century phase of industrialization, urbanization, and westward expansion, but also cyclic economic depression, political corruption, and growing inequality. In that context, an explosive agrarian revolt morphed into an organized mass movement that swept through vast regions of the United States, from the South to the Mid-West. Scores of impoverished Americans joining the Farmer Alliance and the People’s Party, to pose a formidable challenge to the established two-party system. Since then, populism has been part of the American cultural milieu, turning into a veritable political tradition, albeit a somewhat incoherent one, which proves hard to define. Unlike socialism, liberalism, or conservatism, populism does not rest on a full-fledged body of thought. Yet, throughout the rest of US history, popular movements frequently and consistently used slogans that resonated with its typical calls against hierarchy. Flowing like an underground river, populism has often reemerged, at times flooding the landscape, and in the process, it has swayed widely from the left to the right of the political spectrum.

Historians have long struggled with the apparent contradictions of American populism as a political tradition, just like they have striven to make sense of the original nineteenth-century populist movement, often pointing at its inconsistency and shortcomings, while also acknowledging its achievements. In many respects, populism is quite puzzling indeed. Its rise was impressive,

involving millions of embattled farmers, but, considering the depth of the crisis it reflected, it was also remarkably short-lived: it virtually disappeared nationally once the People's Party was knocked out of the scene following its defeat in the presidential and congressional elections of 1896. And yet, part of the populists' electoral platform was rapidly taken up and turned into legislative action by others, while at the local level populist politics did survive in certain areas, some of which faraway from the nation's power centers and from populism's Mid-Western and Southern originary birthplaces, for another decade or two. As an ideology, moreover, populism was relatively lacking in overall vision and consistency, especially if compared to socialism or laissez-faire political economy. That does not mean, however, that it was detached from modernity and from the momentous changes then occurring in America society, or from contemporary stirrings for a more democratic polity. And, probably because of that, it has proven fairly resilient in public discourse.

Recent events are a reminder of just that. The latest outburst associated with the Tea Party and the Trump Presidency as well as Occupy Wall Street and Bernie Sanders' candidacy for the 2016 presidential nomination of the Democratic Party, after all, is only the last iteration of a century-old phenomenon. It remains to be seen whether populism will actually become a hallmark of American politics in the future, but past events may shed some light. Drawing from the large body of scholarship available on the subject also makes it for an interesting point of reflection upon the relationship of politics and scholarship itself. As populism gradually entered the mainstream, historians have been drawn to it time and again, to try and track its origins back to the nineteenth century, and their attempts to make sense of it have acquired changing meanings politically. With no ambition to exhaust such huge topics, but to at least help pondering over those questions, it might be worth considering a few major works of historiography.

The first important contribution to reconstructing the history of populism was John Hicks's 1931 *magnum opus*, *The Populist Revolt*, a mostly sympathetic account written at the height of the Great Depression. Hicks concentrated his attention on the Great Plains, the agricultural heartland in the western section of the country, then in hard times as much as, if not more than in the 1880s and '90s, when populism rose and fell, and he portrayed the populists as oppressed but well-organized farmers, who engaged in forms of collective action foreshadowing the development of interest group politics in the 1920s and '30s. In the changing political climate after World War 2, and with the emergence of the Cold War, however, as a moderate-liberal consensus replaced New-Deal progressivism, populism became increasingly controversial. Comer Vann Woodward's more nuanced characterization of its southern roots in his seminal 1951 study, *The Origins of the New South*, although still appreciative of the

populists' struggle for economic and political reform, introduced the idea that they were also rather backward-looking. Then came what would become the dominant interpretation during the heyday of postwar liberalism in American academia, the one outlined by Richard Hofstadter in his masterful fresco of late-nineteenth-early-twentieth-century US political history, *The Age of Reform*, first published in 1955. Troubled with McCarthyism and the emergence of a demagogic right, Hofstadter viewed populism as an inconsistent remnant of the past, laying outside modern currents and representing more a threat than a promise to America. Finally Robert Wiebe, writing a dozen years after Hofstadter, basically confirmed populism's contradictory and overall anachronistic character in his equally authoritative investigation of America's modernization at the turn of the twentieth century, *The Search for Order*¹⁹³.

Yet, by then, as a new surge of popular movements impacted American society with lasting consequences, the time was ripe for another interpretative shift. In the 1970s, as those movements were now ebbing, Nixon's "silent majority" was on the rise, and the political pendulum swung from left to right, Lawrence Goodwyn looked back once again to the nineteenth-century agrarian revolt and provided a nostalgic, somewhat idealized reading of it in *The Populist Moment*. Writing in the Reagan years, once the South had acquired renewed political centrality, Steven Hahn focused on the origins of Dixie populism in Georgia to flesh out the peculiarity of Southern history, filtered through an insightful cultural analysis, much as Woodward had done three decades earlier, but further complicated with sharper notions of race. In the 1990s, which saw Ross Perot's meteoric rise and fall in a grueling presidential campaign, a flamboyant Democrat entering the White House, and a rejuvenated Republican Party skillfully exploiting populist codewords to break decades of Democratic dominance in Congress, historians' concerns with an increasingly rambunctious politics were aptly summarized by Michael Kazin, from a broader, time-spanning perspective, in *The Populist Persuasion*. Kazin's is a sweeping enquiry into the whole gamut of populism's incarnations from the late nineteenth century up to the early 1990s, highlighting the resilience as well as the dangers of a multifarious phenomenon that, over time, had nonetheless acquired the contours of an established set of beliefs¹⁹⁴.

¹⁹³ John Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1931; Comer Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge 1951; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, Vintage Books, New York 1955; Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*, Hill and Wang, New York 1967.

¹⁹⁴ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*, Oxford University Press, New York 1976; Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the*

Both the Left and the Right made populist appeals against the “elites” throughout the twentieth century. By the twentieth-first, with a plain-spoken Republican as President, who sometimes even verged into downright (possibly faked) illiteracy, the enduring influence of populism across America as well as beyond the farmers demographic was likewise emphasized by Robert Johnston in his 2003 pathbreaking study of Progressive-Era Portland, Oregon, *The Radical Middle Class*. And then, in 2007, Charles Postel’s bombshell, *The Populist Vision*, a comprehensive synthesis that presented populism as utterly modern and nationwide in scope, landed on the historiographical battlefield of ideas, making quite a splash: the book won both the Bancroft Prize and the Frederick Jackson Turner Award, the two highest forms of recognition by the historical profession in the United States. The story had come full circle: Postel stood in stark contrast to those who had long diminished populism and for whom it was hardly a beacon of progress. That he gained such widespread acclaim at the very moment in which the US economy was plunging into an epic downfall, once again regenerating the populist hydra, is of course food for thought¹⁹⁵.

But let us now start back from the beginning. While the populist tradition is arguably still alive and well, populism, as a political movement, was originally a product of nineteenth-century America, particularly of a certain section of the country. The populist strongholds were in the post-Reconstruction South and in the ever-expanding West, where northern European immigrants and farmers from older states had settled after the Civil War, bringing nine new states into the Union between 1867 and 1896. Populism was primarily a product of the crisis of Southern and Western agriculture in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, which a number of factors caused. The expansion of the railroads, the inflow of Northern capital, and the ensuing wave of land and financial speculation brought about uneven patterns of economic growth, at times extreme ones, in large areas of the former Confederacy. Starting in the mid-1870s, however, Southern farmers and Western settlers suffered most of all from the decline in the price of wheat and cotton on the international market, from tariff regulation, and from the monetary policies enacted by the Federal Government to strengthen the nation’s financial structure and join the international gold standard in 1879. Those deflationary policies, in particular, involved the withdrawing of the wartime greenbacks and the demonetization of silver, and while supporting the remarkable growth of the nation’s industries in the last

Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890, Oxford University Press, New York 1983; Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, Basic Books, New York 1995.

¹⁹⁵ Robert D. Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2003; Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*, Oxford University Press, New York 2007.

quarter of the nineteenth century, they did hurt the rural economy of the South and West, by exacerbating the problem of credit that was endemic to those regions. As a result, numerous Southern and Western farmers supported the Greenback Party in the electoral campaigns of 1876 and 1880, joined the movement for “free silver”, and set up agricultural and financial cooperatives. Finally, a nation-wide organization, the National Farmers’ Alliance, emerged in the 1880s. Starting in Texas as the Southern Farmer Alliance, it gradually expanded into other Southern and Western states and in a number of crisis-stricken Northern areas as well, in some cases finding common cause with the Colored Farmers’ Alliance, a twin organization by African American farmers, and the Knights of Labor, the fledgling trade union then moving its first steps in the rapidly industrializing North but to a certain extent also in other less developed parts of the country.

By the early 1890s, under the banner of the People’s Party, populism had grown into the first mass political movement in US history. The party conventions of 1890 and 1892 produced a program of sweeping economic and political reforms (the Ocala and Omaha platforms) that, among other proposals, included: the free and unlimited coinage of silver, to expand credit and inflation; government ownership of railroad, telegraph, and telephone companies; a graduated income tax; the direct election of US senators; and legal shielding for trade unions against prosecution for strikes and boycotts. The centerpiece of the populist program, however, was the Sub-Treasury Plan by Charles W. Macune, the Farmer Alliance’s national spokesman. It was a complicated credit scheme that was meant to regulate the crop market and bypass the “money power”, as banks and other major financial operators were dubbed, which strangled debt-ridden farmers. Political reform through the introduction of institutions of direct democracy, such as the referendum and the recall election, was likewise meant to bypass the business-dominated two-party system.

Large popular revolts rarely are the product of economic crises alone. Whereas the emergence of populism cannot be separated from the depression that gripped Southern and Western agriculture in the late nineteenth century, the scope of the movement went beyond the realm of economics, as it included far-reaching political and social reforms. The extent to which those reforms reflected not only a coalition of interests, but also a vision of the world alternative to that of soon-to-prevail corporate America, have long been a matter of contention among historians.

According to Hofstadter, the populists’ foremost detractor, their movement was dominated by commercial farmers working within the capitalistic system and sharing the entrepreneurial ethos of their opponents; the average populist

was essentially, he argued, «a harassed little country businessman»¹⁹⁶. While trying to restore profits, the populists were thus trapped in a patent contradiction between acquisitive motives that did not really distinguish them from modern capitalists, on the one hand, and a yearning for a pre-industrial, almost idyllic yeoman individualism, on the other. Similarly, Wiebe understood populism as part of the evolution from a disappearing society of island, mainly agrarian communities to the more integrated urban and industrial one growing at a fast pace in the late nineteenth century. What united the populist movement was then an inherently inconsistent and therefore inevitably self-defeating political economy, which would ideally freeze economic development at a stage prior to that of monopolistic capitalism while not representing, in fact, a rejection of the capitalist mode of production itself.

As students mostly of political culture, both Hofstadter and Wiebe were certainly cognizant of the at least partial autonomy of politics from economic structures, but they did tend towards a rather binary understanding of social change, owing in some measure to Marxist influences which, despite the Cold War, were not that alien to contemporary American academia. Typically for that time, their approach was also limited by a top-down perspective; therefore, it lacked a proper recognition of the meaning that populism acquired for millions. From that perspective it became difficult to appreciate, for example, the impact that the cooperative model had on farmers not just in terms of allowing them to survive in times of economic distress, but of shaping their politics too. There might have been a contradiction between the ethos of the supposedly isolated, individualist, market-oriented petty entrepreneurs who formed the rank and file of the populist movement and their shared vision of a cooperative commonwealth, but Hofstadter as much as Wiebe solved it by virtually reducing the entire movement to its leadership and by labeling all populists as capitalists. Southern and Western farmers were in fact part of an increasingly globalized market economy, and especially large landowners, who often led the populist movement, perhaps looked primarily at the bottom-line, yet the movement also included hefty numbers of yeomen as well as the landless and the very poor, whose experience of social bonds in all likelihood already included forms of cooperation. Finally, in portraying the milieu in which populism emerged as essentially traditional and outmoded, Hofstadter in particular leveled against the populists the accusation of being distinctly racist and xenophobic. Indeed, their ethnical diversity notwithstanding, and though they tried experiments at interracial collaboration, racism and xenophobia were widespread among them,

¹⁹⁶ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, cit., p. 46.

but those were not, by any stretch of imagination, a peculiarity of the populists at the time.

Economic change figured prominently also in Woodward's study of the New South. Yet, more effectively than Hofstadter and Wiebe later did, he had been able to untie the intricate bundle of race, class, and tradition in the post-Civil War South, the hotbed of the agrarian revolt, while also keeping sectional politics inside the picture. According to Woodward, after the end of Reconstruction a "forked road" to national reunion opened. With the economic depression at its worst stage in the years 1876-1877, there appeared the possibility of an alliance of Eastern industrial workers and Southern and Western farmers, as opposed to the coalition of Southern and Northern interests that coalesced around the complex arrangement of protective tariffs, railroad subsidies, banking privileges, and monetary policies upon which a new economic order was then founded. Appealing to the farmers' resentment against North-Eastern domination, emphasizing white supremacy, and manufacturing the myth of the "Old South" and its "Lost Cause", the so-called "Redeemers" managed to keep control of Southern politics. An elite of entrepreneurs with their roots in the antebellum South formed the leadership of the Redeemers. Politically, this was a coalition of confederate Democrats and conservative Republicans, who came to terms with Northern interests by getting a share in the industrialization of the war-torn South. They skillfully patronized poor whites, pitting them against poor blacks, despite the fact that, after the end of the Civil War, Southern whites were often divided among themselves by local economic issues. The glue that kept this experiment in Southern politics together was the "New South" ideology of economic modernization. Yet most white farmers were in fact "unredeemed." Just like freed blacks, they continued to suffer from the inequities of sharecropping and the crop-lien system, which were made even worse by the declining prices of agricultural products on the international markets and by the high tariffs imposed on industrial products. Thus the populist movement stemmed from a form of domination that was both economic *and* political.

Woodward's populists were animated by a deep-seated resentment that inspired a program of sweeping political and economic reform. The nature of that resentment – what shaped and propelled it – is precisely the problem here. «Insurgent movements – as Goodwyn later noted – are not the product of "hard times", they are the product of insurgent cultures», and in fact the idea of a "movement culture" was central to his study. He emphasized the populists' effort at movement-building, including the support of cooperative credit, marketing, and purchasing, and most importantly the education and politicization of farmers by means of thousands traveling lectures. He celebrated the achievements of the populist movement which, despite the influence of

sectional, racial, and ethnic loyalties, did create an alternative political identity, one founded primarily on an anti-hierarchical concept of politics and on the idea that government could and should regulate certain sectors of the economy for the benefit of the great majority of the people¹⁹⁷.

Hahn further enhanced our understanding of populist culture, even though his local study of the Georgia Upcountry had both the beauty of an in-depth analysis and the shortcomings of typicality. Spanning four decades, from about 1850 to 1890, Hahn's broad view allowed him to fully grasp the social and cultural change that informed the region's politics in the period leading up to the agrarian revolt, viewed as a response to the disruption of a largely pre-industrial order rooted in the antebellum period. The depression certainly worked as a brutal equalizer of social conditions, squeezing small and large landowners alike, while also hitting hard the many landless whites who had been small landowners earlier but still retained the outlook of petty proprietors. Yet, Hahn also emphasized the importance of the discursive glue that kept the populists together: a "republican producer ideology" that resonated in large swaths of the South and that, in terms of the social relations it entailed, was at odds with the emerging trends in rapidly industrializing America. Hahn argued that populism counterposed «the hegemony of the marketplace» to «the vision of a producers' commonwealth achieved through cooperative enterprise and public regulation of exchange». Part of this vision were also traditional paternalist notions, which the importance of the household as the dominant productive unit in the South reinforced, inviting farm households to locate economic exploitation in the sphere of exchange rather than production, hence weakening the appeal of class politics. Republican producer ideology thus tended to also exclude landless farmers, and especially African Americans among those, as it implicitly endorsed racist assumptions. Hahn's study therefore suggested that Goodwyn's characterization of populism as anti-hierarchical must be re-defined not only in light of enduring racial prejudice, which Goodwyn too acknowledged, but also because populism challenged domination by the "money power" as much as it perpetuated paternalism¹⁹⁸.

«Nowhere did populism sink deeper roots than in the South», Hahn noted. Yet, although the South, including the Georgia Upcountry, was in all evidence a bastion of populism, the agrarian revolt spread also to other regions, where it did not always look the same. Likewise, the Georgia Upcountry was not necessarily representative of the whole South. In Texas, for example, where the Farmer Alliance was originally born in 1877, large landowners could not reproduce the

¹⁹⁷ Goodwyn, *The populist Moment*, cit., p. 61.

¹⁹⁸ Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, cit., p. 282.

kind of loyalties long prevalent in other states of the former Confederacy. Furthermore, as the populists embraced an interclass producer ideology, they also reached out to middle-class reformers and urban workers, such as the activists of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the Prohibition Party, the Knights of Labor and their heir trade-union organization, the American Federation of Labor, who did not fit easily in the traditional social order that Hahn portrayed¹⁹⁹.

Goodwyn and Hahn emphasized different aspects of the populists' struggle to fulfill the promise of American democracy, and in fact the language of civic nationalism, which Kazin skillfully analyzed, was appropriated by the populists, who often quoted from the preamble of the US Constitution in their speeches. That language, however, could be inclusive as much as exclusive, especially when it mixed with racism. While Southern populists often denounced lynchings or the convict lease and tried to build an interracial coalition that could unseat the white supremacists who dominated Southern politics, racial hierarchy was reproduced within the populist movement, as African Americans were never allowed to attain positions of leadership. Ultimately, race proved fatally divisive in the South. Most blacks remained loyal to the party of Lincoln while Democrats were able to co-opt white populist and lay the foundations of Jim Crow. «The barriers of racial discrimination – according to Woodward – mounted in direct ratio with the tide of political democracy among whites»²⁰⁰.

The populist movement culminated in the 1896 elections, a contest between opposite definitions of patriotism revolving around the monetary issue and a highly divisive, fiercely fought confrontation – as Wiebe noted, «very few campaigns have matched this one in scurrility and in sheer emotional release»²⁰¹. Electoral results reflected the economic strength of the populists' opponents. Industrialists rallied around and generously funded the Republican Party and its candidate to the Presidency, William McKinley, at the same time that the farmers' cooperative system was declining because of a lack of access to credit. But McKinley's election, along with Republican wins in Congress, also demonstrated the populists' inherent weakness: they tried to pull together a large coalition of farmers and workers, but were unable to replicate in urban areas the kind of structures and the movement culture they had built in the countryside. The labor movement, moreover, was overwhelmed by the combined forces of big business and the federal government.

Finally, the embrace of the Democratic Party proved fatal to populism. Southern democrats emasculated the populists' reform platform, embracing the

¹⁹⁹ Ivi, p. 1.

²⁰⁰ Woodward, *The Origins of the New South*, cit., p. 211.

²⁰¹ Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, cit. p. 103.

cause of free silver while dismissing the other, more radical, political initiatives of the People's Party. It can be argued that strained racial relations in the South, above all, shaped national politics in this crucial passage of American political history. The constitutional framework also curbed the third-party alternative. After the end of Reconstruction, despite the deepening of the economic crisis, the political system was mired in the ideological division conjured by the Civil War. The Democrats and Republicans in Congress generated a decade-long stalemate, proving unable to come to grips with the social tensions that industrialization and an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth created. The emergence, in the 1890s, of the People's Party opened the possibility of a political realignment. Yet, in the end, the two-party system reabsorbed the agrarian revolt.

The 1896 elections marked a shift of great historical significance. In Goodwyn's words, it represented «an important juncture in the political consolidation of the industrial culture»²⁰². Yet this is not to suggest that the populist platform necessarily proved anachronistic or unrealistic. Populist-Democratic alliances did succeed in countless state and local elections throughout the 1890s, ushering in new legislation by which measures such as government control of transportation and communications were enacted for the first time; constitutional innovations such as the referendum and the initiative and recall elections were also introduced in several states. At the federal level, despite a crushing defeat, the People's Party was nonetheless able to elect a large enough contingent of US Senators and Congressmen to continue exert pressure on the legislative process, and many of the populists' ideas came to fruition eventually, as a new cadre of reformers from the emerging urban middle class gained power and realized them in the following years and decades. Major reform proposals originally by the populists became the law of the land during the Progressive Era and the New Deal. For example, the direct election of US Senators was introduced by constitutional amendment in 1913, while many features of Macune's Sub-Treasury Plan finally found home in the 1912 Warehouse Act and the 1933 Commodity Credit Corporation Act.

Further evidence of populism's endurance and merging with progressivism, and of its reach nationwide, can be found in early-twentieth-century Portland, Oregon, where a kind of populist/progressive political culture informed middle-class politics, giving rise to what Johnston considered «one of the greatest populist experiments in American history»²⁰³. Portland's *petite bourgeoisie* of shop owners and small manufacturers, who at times join forces with their employees, particularly skilled workers, successfully campaigned for a

²⁰² Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, cit., p. xii.

²⁰³ Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class*, cit., p. 116.

variety of reforms ranging from the initiative election and the referendum to woman suffrage. Their influence, however, should not be overestimated – some reform proposals failed, as was the case with the graduated income tax; nor could it always be equated with progressive causes, especially when it came to education, an issue that revealed the dark undertones of this Oregonian strand of populism. Though in this instance too they were destined to failure, populist Portlanders used egalitarian arguments to mobilize for a school bill that eliminated private and religious schools by making public school attendance compulsory, a clearly anti-Catholic measure inspired by the local branch of the Ku Klux Klan, which attracted thousands among the city's overwhelmingly White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant populace. With widespread popular support, the city government passed the bill, but it was later overturned by the US Supreme Court.

The populists' stance on race relations, indeed a recurrent theme in the historiography, is duly addressed by Postel in his recent synthesis, though it does not take much space in it. In particular, he maintained that Southern populists, albeit with some notable exceptions, generally viewed the legal segregation and disenfranchisement of nonwhites as «an essential part of the New South doctrine of progressive development», and that they might even be considered as «the driving force behind the new Jim Crow laws»²⁰⁴. But if the racial attitudes of the populists are to be understood in the context of the peculiar modernizing ideology that went hand in hand with the establishment of Jim Crow, that does not detract from Postel's main argument about the modernity of populism, which sets him apart from the older and long-prevailing interpretative approach by such scholars as Woodward, who argued that, for most populists, «the Gospel of Progress was nonsense»²⁰⁵. Rather, Postel started from the premise that the populists fashioned «an alternative modernity suitable to their own interests»; he thus rejected the notion that they «were at once both traditionalist and modern», which «might erroneously suggest that the populists were in some qualitative way less modern than their urban, academic, and other modernizing counterparts»²⁰⁶. As much as those, in his view, they actually believed in progress and the transformative power of science and technology.

The key to Postel's interpretation of populism as forward-looking, and definitely his most important contribution, is the idea of it as also thoroughly business-oriented, eagerly embracing «business methods, education, and technology», and building its organizations «from “the business standpoint”». Hence its relevance for America's economic, social, and political development as

²⁰⁴ Postel, *The Populist Vision*, cit., pp. 175-176.

²⁰⁵ Woodward, *The Origins of the New South*, cit., p. 251.

²⁰⁶ Postel, *The Populist Vision*, cit., pp. 4, 11.

a whole, that is, not necessarily limited to areas at the time more or less marginal and largely secondary to the manufacturing and financial engines of the Northeast and upper Midwest as well as inclusive of a sizable chunk of the nation. According to Postel, for instance, the populists' cooperative movement expressed a kind of "civic boosterism" that proved instrumental to the growth of the fledgling metropolises of the South and West – incidentally, one of his most striking accomplishments is the discovery of a solid populist movement in California. From such a perspective, moreover, one can better appreciate the populists' influence beyond strictly electoral politics. Postel contended that they held «a nonpartisan, managerial, and government-as-business vision of politics» and «strove for a new type of politics that would deliver rationalized, nonpartisan, and businesslike governance». This helps understand the way they ended up supporting large national institutions such as the US Post Office, the Census Bureau, and most importantly the US Department of Agriculture, then a key actor in the spread of scientific methods of farming, while still adopting an anti-statist rhetoric to denounce corporate encroachment on the federal government and undue reach into local matters²⁰⁷.

Postel's is also a riveting account of populism as a grassroots movement, with major findings, notably about the significant role played by female activists. It turns out that hundreds of thousands of women participated in it, finding unprecedented opportunities to engage politically on an equal footing with men as well as venues for better education and employment, improved conditions of domestic work, and more just marriage and family relationships. In short, populism raised for women «the prospects of a more independent and modern life»²⁰⁸.

Postel wrote a monumental and meticulously detailed work of historical reconstruction that substantially enriched our grasp of populism. Synthesizing plenty of research on the subject, he also poured much old wine into a brand new bottle, and in doing that, so to speak, he put Hofstadter on his head. Whereas the latter, and several others following in his footsteps, viewed commercial farmers as little more than small-time capitalists frustrated by their diminishing returns, who basically led an entire movement to a dead end, Postel made them spearheads of innovative change that struck a viable balance between modernization and tradition, competition and cooperation, democracy and technocracy, even though they did not achieve as much as they hoped for. That he put to rest, once and for all, age-old questions about class-politics within the populist movement itself or at the ballot box, as in the crucial 1896 elections,

²⁰⁷ Ivi, pp. 15, 18, 139.

²⁰⁸ Ivi, p. 72.

however, is less clear. In a way, the all-encompassing trope of modernity that he used tends to obscure key aspects of the issue, by superimposing an ideological layer over underlying conflicts. Postel's treatment of the interplay of class and race is a case in point. He rightly stressed the interconnection between racism and the New South modernizing ideology, but this may have led him to underestimate the potential of the biracial farmer-labor coalition and how that was overwhelmed by internal as well as external political factors. After all, 1896 was also the year of the landmark US Supreme Court ruling on *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a turning point in the road to Jim Crow, a regime which often hit poor whites as well as blacks.

These century-old events acquired fresh significance in the years following the publication of Postel's prize-winning book, as the politics of class and race came back with a vengeance. The worst economic crisis since the Great Depression and the election of the first African American president created a volatile environment in which "socialist" was no longer a curse word to a surprising number of Americans convinced to live in a new Gilded Age and therefore steeped in an anti-hierarchical mood, while others stoke hidden fears about an imminent decline of white America. And when Obama's future successor started his presidential campaign ranting against racial minorities while descending from literally a gilded escalator, all of that acquired a whole new and all-too-real meaning. Populism, as Kazin so convincingly reminded us, is a political culture that persisted, on and off, for a very long time, from Huey Long and Father Coughlin in the 1930s through Abbie Hoffman and George Wallace in the 1960s, to name just a few specimens from other turbulent times. It now appears to be alive and well under Trump. It is a sure bet that historians will keep interrogating its past and that new questions will be raised as scholarly research advances and political sensibilities continue to change.

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